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ON THE MOVE : First Nations
and Inuit Entrepreneurs



On The Move

First Nations and Inuit entrepreneurs

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Entrepreneur provides international expertise

Businessman says corporate Canada must communicate with First Nations

David Tuccaro owns a lot of heavy construction equipment. He uses it to shift paradigms.

"It is becoming more and more important for corporate Canada to talk to the Aboriginal people," says the dynamic Fort McMurray businessman from the Mikisew Cree Band. "In the past, Aboriginal people were viewed as costly impediments. Now, there's a shift. We're being seen as valuable partners."

Tuccaro is being bidding to head the valuable-partner class: Tuccaro companies Neegan Development Corp. and Tuc's Contracting are key local allies for Syncrude Canada, a major player in the multi-billion-dollar development of northern Alberta's Athabasca oil sands.

Whether it's energy companies, forestry or mining, remarks Tuccaro, 42, "as the developers move farther north, they come across heavier concentrations of Aboriginal communities. Somewhere along the way they have to talk to the people where they impact the most, like it or not."

"If we don't take advantage and negotiate with the people who are developing near us, we're going to lose out again."

Entrepreneurial bona fides and high respect in his community have earned Tuccaro attentive listeners when he speaks out — without rancor but firmly — on such themes. After working a year as Neegan's president, he bought the earthmoving and mining services firm in 1991 from the four local First Nations who owned it. He had turned the struggling \$2-million concern into a robust \$10-million company by last year.

Neegan is 70 per cent staffed by Aboriginal workers. Tuc's Contracting, which provides water and vacuum trucks to clear industrial and human waste from work sites, has 60 per cent Aboriginal staff and has grown in seven years to become a \$4-million business.



Neegan General Manager Gareth Jenkins and David Tuccaro stand beside one of the company's 50-ton earth-moving trucks.

"No longer can a corporation come in and develop resources and just leave a big hole in the ground," says Tuccaro. "The resources are there for everybody to share but they weren't shared in the past. Don't give us handouts, give us employment."

Not only has Neegan's relationship with Syncrude generated jobs, it has supplied cooperative expertise to the smaller firm in areas like elevating safety standards. Tuccaro wants to operate at world-class standards and that's winning new projects for him in another part of

the world, New Zealand, where Aboriginal Maori communities have sought his help to create commercial properties.

In a lot of cases what happens globally with Aboriginal people is that they have the lands but lack the management expertise to bring a deal," says Tuccaro. "And some of these projects are so huge, they need five to 10 years to leverage properly."

"What used to happen is that some huge multinational corporation would come in and buy the property and all they [Aboriginal

landholders] got out of it was some mental work."

Instead, Tuccaro proposes to assist in developing a long-term management approach for his Maori clients, who he believes have similar goals to the people of First Nations communities in Alberta.

"The majority of the [Aboriginal] people I've encountered want to have a chance to play a part in the economies of Canada and the world," he observes.

There's an outsize personal determination at work here that has won Tuccaro national attention —

he owns environmental consulting, furniture-making and other companies as well. Individual grt aside, youth need to be helped with access to the tools for success, he notes.

First and foremost, that means education.

"There has to be a huge commitment to education by the Aboriginal leadership at First Nations locations," he concludes.

"Economies come and go, up and down, booms and bust, but if our kids are educated, there's always something they can do."

Aboriginal Capital Corp. creates new opportunities

Provide business keys to success

Proposed Aboriginal business ventures have had a long history of looking impossible to mainstream lenders.

In the Yukon, that reality spurred the 1985 creation of Dana Naye Ventures, an Aboriginal Capital Corporation (ACC) which not only lends money but helps clients produce business plans, offers them management consultation, puts on workshops and runs a Youth Business Program.

That's one example among the more than 30 ACCs across Canada, typically lending up to \$40,000 at a time, along with giving management support.

The needs being addressed are acute. Because the Indian Act does not allow lenders to treat assets on reserve as collateral, banks have no security on their loans to Aboriginal applicants and would not advance money for building homes or to establish a business.

"Indeed, it was usually not possible for an Aboriginal contractor to get a construction contract even on First Nations land if a bond was required in the contract specifications."

The Aboriginal Contract Guarantee Instrument, an initiative resulting from a two-year collaboration between the National Aboriginal Capital Corporations Association (NACCA) and Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, will soon be delivered through the NACCA network offering contract performance guarantees and helping Aboriginal businesses and contractors overcome such historic restraints.

Section 89 of the Indian Act says a lender can't go onto a reserve to seize assets," explains Scott Drummond, eastern office manager for NACCA in Toronto.

"So in the 1950's, the [federal] government started doing direct lending to Aboriginal businesses. But this was civil servants doing this as opposed to lending professionals."

Then, in the mid-eighties, Employment Canada, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Industry Canada came together to create these Aboriginal Capital Corporations, saying, "We'll give you the capital, you go out and lend."

The premise, of course, is that ACCs are better placed to understand the needs of entrepreneurs and the obstacles they face when seeking capital for business needs.

"Our acceptance ratio [of loan applications] is 90 per cent. It's not much, much higher," Drummond affirms. "But where we mitigate our risks is on the back end of it. We let the entrepreneur know that we're on your tail about it. The [mainstream] bank is low risk, high volume and we're the opposite."

Some of that risk is passed back to clients in the form of higher interest rates (about 11.5 per cent at present) to mitigate a 5 per cent non-loss average. "We're unlike the banks that do formula lending, as in, 'We'll lend him 50 per cent of the net asset value, so we can't really lose,'" Drummond observes. "What we do is more what I call character lending. It's much more personal. We check out the community."

When Drummond started in the field a decade ago, the banks didn't want a First Nations deal without a guarantee from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. But he believes that's changing. And so do some key banking officials.

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'I'd worked hard for others, I just wanted to work for myself'

Corey Hill traded sweaty welding job to open a beauty salon and health spa

People got the message that Corey Hill was the determined type around the time she showed up for classes in welding at the age of 17. She was the only Aboriginal person and the only woman in her class at the Guelph, Ont. technical

college.

Not everyone was clear on what she was doing there, until she learned her trade well enough to get a job with the Six Nations Natural Gas Company.

After several years of taking care

of herself with that skill, she started everybody in her Mohawk community on southwestern Ontario's Grand River yet again by leaving her position.

"We kept getting laid off at the gas company," says Hill, 29.

"I realized I'd worked so hard for other people, I just wanted to work for myself."

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Corey Hill runs a thriving health spa in Oshweken, Ontario.

Anokiiwin Training Institute opens doors

Aboriginal lands across Canada feature valued commodities ranging from gas and oil to gold and diamonds. But nothing in sustainable economic development can compete with the glitter of skills and jobs.

Understanding that immutable premise is what has driven the career of Elaine Cowan, whose Anokiiwin Training Institute in Winnipeg has taught over 1,000 students, many subsequently placed by sister firm Anokiiwin Employment Solutions.

"We've been there," says Cowan, the Ojibway business leader who received an award as woman entrepreneur of the year in 1993 from a Manitoba business association. "We've been raised in the [Aboriginal] community, we've faced some

of the challenges ourselves."

Statistically as well as anecdotally, those challenges are deep and continuing to rise. Unemployment is substantially higher in the Aboriginal community than across Canadian society, while employment at the lowest skill levels is proportionately double that of the non-Aboriginal population.

Significantly, too, Canada's Aboriginal population of 1.4 million is considerably younger than that of Canada as a whole. The Aboriginal working age population of 621,500 in the last census in 1991 will have expanded by a staggering 300,000 persons by 2006.

"There is a great effort being made on hiring qualified Aboriginal candidates for jobs, but the challenge right now is the competition

for those people," remarks Cowan. "That's why I think there has to be a very creative approach around this whole issue. You have a lot of unemployed Aboriginal people and very few of these organizations that are hiring are looking at the age of 17."

Education and training are obviously key whenever unemployment is discussed. Here, too, Aboriginal communities have a large gap to close, with just over half their population having completed a high school education (close to three-quarters of Canadians overall have finished secondary school).

The needed innovation Cowan refers to, in her view, must be applied both to skills development and job placement. That's what animated her to join with a partner in

1995 to start what has become The Anokiiwin Group, now with 40 staff and offices in Thompson as well as Winnipeg.

"I had been working primarily with government as a training director for the Aboriginal communities in Manitoba," relates Cowan, who previously worked with the provincial Minister of Northern Affairs and the Manitoba Energy/Air-Threat Task Force. "Because I had years of experience in this area, I really had some creative approaches to HR development. I had talked quite often to a colleague of mine, saying, 'Could I do this in a way that is not a generic approach but based on individual needs, a very customized approach?'"

Anokiiwin's training methods re-

fine adult learning techniques to match the cultural learning styles of the different Aboriginal groups represented by participants. Aboriginal Elders take part in program activities and evaluations are made in a "sharing circle" that underlines the community orientation of the training process itself.

Management skills and computer training are among the most requested Anokiiwin programs, which also include such trade skills as heavy equipment operation, truck driving and carpentry. Regional jobs are often attached to resource-based industries, which require skills in construction trades, hospitality and health care. Urban-community needs tend to revolve around administrative and technical skills.

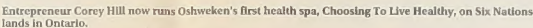
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Band benefits from resource ties

But if that's a case history worth emulating, Parrish cautions that it's not easily done. "Chief Deneen understood business, understood the opportunities in the oil field," says Parrish. "But it's tough doing business anywhere, it's tough doing business in the North, it's tough in an Aboriginal band to have sustained success. I think it's worked there for ADK because they are tough on themselves and they are tough on others. They know that this is a business. They know that it's not profitable, they can't achieve their other goals. If some of their own band members are not performing, there has to be an explanation why."

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Working to str

ford, it made sense that she would need dexterity in a number of related services to create a business drawing a potentially wide range of customers. And Hill was clear on wanting to work with all those cus-

That wouldn't happen without a solid business plan, however. Hi-

Economic and social development remain top objectives

Освоено

Government of Canada has been instrumental in implementing. Aboriginal entrepreneurs can now

Research has shown that when First Nations build effective institutions that match their cultures, successful communities are a result.

"First Nations communities must have the ability themselves to ad-

"We are already shifting the balance of accountability by working very closely, for example, with the Chiefs of Alberta to address this issue of Aboriginal governments' accountability to their citizens."

"And in British Columbia, we have developed a capacity-building

"Some days I get stressed," she says. "But in the long run it will pay off."

shared broadly and the tools of achievement distributed more fairly," he enthuses. "Working in partnership with Aboriginal people with the provinces, the territories and with the private sector, I am confident that we can create a better future for all Canadians."

Chief Louie means business.
The front of Osoyoos Indian Band Development Corporation literature features his

"In 1994, our Band was in the same situation as most Bands in Canada," he related to the Yellowknife conference.

"First and foremost, you have to talk about the entire attitude which this Band has exhibited," says Chris Scott, economic develop-

"We are business people much like you self," the Chief says. "Our goals are basically the same as your goals, to build a strong future, to pursue the good life, prosper from our investments and earn our place in the local economy, thereby earning our freedom."

Sah Naji Kwe Wilderness Spa thrives on independence

Joyce and Moise Rabesca have always been able to manage without private bathrooms or the assistance of major lending institutions.

Their business, fixed at the northwest shore of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories, has depended on it.

"In 1988, we set up a little tent-frame camp on the lake," recounts Joyce Rabesca, whose partner comes from the nearby Dogrib First Nation.

"People knew my husband. They

knew he was involved in hunting, fishing and guiding in this area for years."

It proved a vital familiarity: The Rabescas got into the hospitality business by trading Moise's fishing services for the discarded wood boxes used in local construction.

"We could not get any financing from the government," Joyce remarks. "Banks wouldn't even look at us, being from the bush. We're a private enterprise and it's very, very hard to get funding if you're not a band."

Northerners, fortunately, were not reluctant to lend their patronage to what became the Sah Naji Kwe Wilderness Spa and Meeting Centre, which features the special natural marine clay of the lake, a host of spa therapies and conference facilities for up to 24 people.

Camp Ekwo, the nearby site of the Rabescas' fishing and hunting operation, has for a number of years assured profitability while the spa developed. The caribou season, in practical terms, runs from mid-August to the end of September

but a lot of sportsmen come through in that time. "It's very packaged, very systematic, very professionally done," says Joyce, "and it's been a great business opportunity for Aboriginal people working at the camp as guides."

Meanwhile, there's been notable interest developing in the spa from around the continent. The therapeutic clay has inspired media attention in the southern cities, while the Rabescas' wilderness programs in which guests are taken

into the bush for five days to learn how to set fishing nets, hunt caribou, collect native medicines and make snowshoes.

"We get tons of inquiries from the south but they're still looking for something more upscale," sighs Joyce. "Northerners know what to expect."

Hearing that the spa employs tent-frame accommodations, city novices imagine being crammed in nylon pupes with water dripping on

their heads rather than the sturdy canvas rooms with wooden platform floors and rugs that the spa actually affords.

For the last four years, the Rabescas have been looking to address the cavity of potential guests in a definitive way. The couple is negotiating with Asian investors to create an unarguably high-end premises of wood and stone that will house up to 120 guests. The undertaking would cost an estimated \$13-million and generate 50 seasonal jobs.

Determination paved way for Millbrook Commercial Park

Running right through the community of the Millbrook Band is one of the busiest highways in Nova Scotia, with well over 20,000 vehicles whizzing by each day.

Enticing some of those cars to pull over and stop for a while has long been a notion with distinct commercial possibilities. And the completion of a \$7.4-million overpass this spring should bring some of those to fruition, with the first commercial retailers signed on and more to come.

"It has been a struggle for many years to accomplish this, but now things are happening because of the efforts of a very proactive Band council and Band membership," says Lloyd Johnson, economic development officer for the 1,100 member First Nation near Truro.

Study governance and a consistent goal have been needed on the Band's part to get through a complex series of regulatory entanglements to allow for a commercial park, now known as the Truro Power Centre. Federal money from Indian Affairs and Northern Development is paying for the overpass, which will be maintained by the Nova Scotia Department of Transportation and Public Works.

"Once the overpass is completed, this centre is probably second to none in Atlantic Canada in terms of highway visibility," says Johnson, who believes the development has the potential to attract the likes of such big-box retailers as Costco, IKEA and Future Shop.

The creation of Highway 102 in 1972 created a major link to the metropolitan Halifax area but divided reserve land.

The province using that route would be going through the heart of the community," notes Johnson of Millbrook's early reluctance, fearing that the Band would be "intimidated" by Truro to make a deal allowing the road construction.

The arrangement at the time permitted the limited commercial enterprise alongside the highway and Johnson sums that — "it's still a sore point with me... all we were entitled to was basket shops."

Negotiations on those points took years, again underlining the



Nova Scotia Premier John Hamm, Millbrook Chief Lawrence Paul, and Indian Affairs and Northern Development Minister Robert Nault cut the ribbon to officially open Millbrook's Power Centre on January 11, 2001.

need for a well organized effort on the part of the Band, which also won a strong referendum decision among its members to proceed. "The province was quite sticky with the safety standards and we jumped through every hoop," Johnson recounts. "And this was with Band money."

An Ultramar gas station, Tim Horton's and Sobeys' convenience store are among the first businesses committed to the site. A compound of Aboriginal businesses, the Band Council anticipates, will grow more slowly than the part of the park pursuing multinational concerns.

That's what has made vital an

agreement that will allow Millbrook Band Council to levy taxes on businesses in the park, in this case at rates no higher than the most favourable rates in neighbouring Truro.

The language of the federal Indian Act, which did not anticipate such commercial developments on reserves, has had to be modified in recent years to permit such scenarios. Having such a tax-by-law to favour the needs of the reserve is "an innovation in Atlantic Canada but it's commonplace in B.C.," says Johnson, recalling a landmark federal decision that stemmed from a plea for taxation rights from a Kamloops, B.C. First Nation community

in the mid-80s.

Those rights were formalized in 1988 when amendments to the Indian Act ended Aboriginal powers of taxation to First Nations interests in "conditionally surrendered" or "designated" lands such as a commercial park on reserve terrain. The following year brought the creation of the Indian Taxation Advisory Board in Ottawa to work with First Nations councils and the federal government on tax issues.

"The tax law is budget-based," explains Johnson. "You have to demonstrate that the tax revenues are being used for infrastructure."

Overpass and tax structure in place, success for the Truro Power

Centre will still not be a slam dunk. Millbrook lost out after a tantalizing series of conversations with representative of Wal-Mart, who ultimately decided that the retailer prefers to own its property — not an option on the reserve.

More broadly, "In Atlantic Canada there's fear of setting up business on the reserve because of red tape, politics and the unknown," comments Johnson.

That gas station, convenience store and donut shop aren't a bad beginning, however. Over a cup of coffee and a respite from that busy highway, travellers may find the Millbrook Band community is becoming a bit more familiar.

Arctic Beverages serves unique niche

Lone Aboriginal Pepsi franchise in the world

Anyone interested 10 years ago in owning a company likely to excel at giving its salespeople users couldn't have missed Arctic Beverages.

The Pepsi-Cola Canada bottler's territory consisted of frigid northern Manitoba and a chilly little chunk of Saskatchewan, places where communities are small, far apart and expensive to get to.

Yet, improbably enough, a consortium of 55 Manitoba First Nations, representing 32,000 Aboriginal people got interested in buying the Filin Flon company in 1991.

The response was basically that this was an impossible scenario and it was just not going to happen," recalls Marvin Tiller, chief executive officer and president of Arctic Beverages and of its parent, the Tribal Councils Investment Group of Manitoba (TCIG).

Arctic as TCIG's first acquisition, undertook something Pepsi corporate headquarters didn't. That 80 per cent of the people who would be drinking Arctic's soft drinks were the people investing in the distributor through TCIG.

The new ownership started making its mark quickly, winning distribution rights in what is now Nunavut, along with northern Saskatchewan and northern Ontario. The basic challenge was as stern as ever — up to seven carriers were needed for a single remote delivery, making a 24-case of Pepsi or 7-up cost \$30 to customers in Baffin Island.

But the company was growing. And proving Arctic Beverages has doubled its sales since the purchase and, more remarkably still, has been acknowledged as the fastest-growing Pepsi bottler in Canada.

"We are the only Aboriginal bottling franchise in Pepsi's system worldwide and they take great pride in this company," remarks Tiller.

Sean Post, Arctic's general manager, agrees. "It took a bit of selling to convince (Pepsi) buyers that we are our biggest supporters," he says.

Arctic found certain improved efficiencies in its network of road, rail, boat and plane reducing costly breakage. But its real secret has been in working with the reverse of normal industry ratios in which buyers usually take 80 per cent of their products to national chain stores and the rest to small independent stores.

Given the company's territory, most of Arctic's retailers are small independents.

Again, many of the small independent stores are owned by customers, rightly see themselves as Arctic's ultimate owners, which creates all sorts of receptivity to the goods in this company," remarks Post.

"I've been more of a traditional company, we'd have 10 times that many."

Both men praise the careful separation of Aboriginal politics from company operations; TCIG wants First Nations participation in the mainstream economy so Tiller insists on a cost-plus business-like approach to company issues.

What's made TCIG initiatives like the Arctic Beverages purchase successful? "First, says Tiller, must come scrupulous due diligence before entering a venture. Next, and always, comes strong governance. "You cannot have it committed to it," Tiller declares. "It's just a no-win deal to push that aside or take it lightly."

Bank is building profitable business with Aboriginal community

Continued From Page 1

"We have moved to build a profitable business with the Aboriginal community on a national basis," says Ron Jamieson, senior vice-president for the Bank of Montreal in Toronto.

"I am Native myself and, in fact, I still live on the reserve (Six Nations of the Grand River), so I am quite comfortable with the idea of an Aboriginal business looking for access to capital."

Jamieson noted that ACCs needed to be formed "for the express purpose of being development lenders because banks at the time were not going to loan them money on a startup business." But he also believes the environment is improving.

"An attitude of cooperation between government, mainstream lenders and, of course, the Aboriginal community, where everybody

takes some responsibility in the transaction, can work," he declares. "I think we've shown it works."

A resonant example is that Jamieson's bank now does housing loans to individuals on the reserve without government guarantees, a previously unknown thing.

Close working relations with band councils have created the turnaround.

"We have been operating this way very successfully on 12 reserves, fully without any foreclosures as we speak," Jamieson reports.

That experience is echoed by the Royal Bank's Charlie Coffey, executive vice president for government and community affairs in Toronto.

"The default rate for these (Aboriginal housing) programs is less than the national average," he remarks.

Coffey has strong feelings on this

theme, inspired by his involvement with the Aboriginal community while posted in Winnipeg over a decade ago.

As the banks began in the mid-90s to understand more about the Aboriginal market, "I said then that the status quo for Aboriginal people is not an option," says Coffey. "My belief is that economic development is the engine that will drive the creation of wealth and well-being in Aboriginal communities."

Historic mistreatment of the Aboriginal population makes support for such development a moral imperative, Coffey feels, but it also corresponds to sound business practices.

"I remind people that the strategic importance of the Aboriginal market should not be lost on any financial organization," companies supplying services, financial or otherwise, ignore that market at

their own peril."

Increased awareness of the needs has even led to the launch of the First Nations Bank of Canada, a joint venture between the Saskatchewan Indian Equity Foundation and the Toronto Dominion Bank.

The First Nations Bank is based in Saskatoon but offers account services through TD branches across the country, as well as through electronic and telephone services.

Aboriginal people have long been stymied in seeking equity financing, agrees bank chairman Keith Martell, but he points out that the whole model for Aboriginal loans is unique.

For example, a house needed in Nunavut may not have much collateral, but a week goes by that "it's more about access to an economy, to good-paying jobs and

stability," Martell remarks. "The primary focus we need to be looking at is economic development. Access to capital alone doesn't take you very far."

As Aboriginal people have settled land claims, increased their participation in land use and become an important working-age demographic, the impetus for that development is growing markedly.

"The broader Canadian business community is looking around and saying, 'Hey, this is an opportunity,'" comments Jamieson, "because Aboriginal people are in control of a significant amount of land and resources."

Many companies are seeing that this is a growing workforce, a growing population, they need hundreds of thousands of homes. There's hardly a week goes by that I don't get a call about this from the head of a major organization."

Diamonds are Yellowknife's 'brilliant future'

The new civic motto around Yellowknife is that the town is where "a golden history meets a brilliant future."

The gold ore that drove the early economy of Canada's North isn't entirely history, but depressed world prices for the metal kept potential mining operations mired below profitability in most parts of the region.

What glitters in recent years, of course, are the Northwest Territories' diamonds, the "brilliant" new economic pillars.

As several international firms work to extract the initial \$24-billion of the stones estimated to lie beneath their claims,

Yellowknife has sprouted the least likely of Arctic industries: Diamond cutting and polishing plants.

"Normally, this industry has only been developed in Europe, Israel and India," remarks Darrell Beaulieu, chief executive officer of the First Nations-owned Deton Cho Corporation, which runs one of those plants in partnership with Goldcoast Inc. of Calgary.

What we're doing is finishing the product that is mined from the land here."

Earning that right took a determined effort by the territorial government to insure that a portion of the stones are processed locally

rather than in Antwerp or Tel Aviv. The result, says Beaulieu, whose company belongs to the Yellowknife Diamond Council, has been significant for First Nations people in the region.

"We were looking at employing Aboriginal students from our community and this industry has brought a whole new component to the existing economy," he comments.

Deton Cho's 25 workers in diamond finishing include Deton students who are undergoing a three-to-five year training in sorting, laser cutting and polishing the stones.

"These skills are transferable and the students can take them wherever they want,"

says Beaulieu, noting that current projections anticipate some 25 years of diamond extraction in the Territories.

Deton Cho's recent enterprise in diamonds is clearly a new direction for the community, yet not without analogies to its traditional activities. The company has long served the mining industry in the region, building and catering work camps and assisting with haulage.

Diamonds are in one sense just the latest example of how the community has managed to see to it that resources beneath the ground translate into opportunities on the surface.

Taybridge Communications surfs latest IT trends

Something happened to David Lewis one day as he was en route to getting a degree in journalism. He got caught in the World Wide Web and has never quite found his way out again.

"I started dabbling in Web stuff before most people were doing that," says Lewis, 34, of Taymouth, N.B. near Fredericton. "And I always had the feeling that I'd do a business on my own."

Starting Taybridge Communications on a part-time basis in 1992, Lewis has been able to make himself to his own information technology operation full-time for the last three years.

Taybridge does Internet project management, Web design, CD-ROM development and the like for a diverse array of clients currently all based in the United States. Company marketing is virtually built into much of the work because of its presence on the Web. And the smallness of Lewis's business has been irrelevant; Lewis has

won customers ranging from a die cutting operation in North Carolina to the California software maker NetObjects Inc.

Information technology, remarks Lewis, who grew up in British Columbia and moved to New Brunswick nine years ago, has been "almost a combination of Industrial Revolution and the gold rush."

The gold rush mentality came to a halt last April (when technology stocks fell), but the big thing is that it's a shakeout and things will grow from there. What it comes down to is if you can make the business profitable.

Requiring only a modest capital investment and being able to work from his own home have afforded Lewis a head start on gaining profitability.

He's also received about \$18,000 in contributions in the last several years from Aboriginal Business Canada, a federal initiative of industry Canada.

"The big thing I've really tried to

instill in my business is a high level of service and a high level of professionalism," comments Lewis, who believes quality work will continue to distinguish the myriad of players in the IT field.

Notwithstanding the recent turbulence in the IT sector, the need for skilled people in Canada is still considerable. That's both an opportunity and challenge for Aboriginal communities, where math and science have not traditionally been emphasized in schooling and entry rates to high-technology fields have been very low.

Overcoming that background will sometimes require concerted efforts involving several agencies. Saskatchewan offers a good example. There, the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology has designed a Careers in Electronics program that has been supported by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Human Resources Development Canada and SaskTel.

An initial program effort involved selecting 23 Aboriginal students in the province based on their academic background, which included algebra and physics courses in high school. Training in electronics was then provided by the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology while using the facilities and equipment of SaskTel.

The trainees were then offered positions with the telecommunications industry. Some trainees may remain with SaskTel while others will go on to seek positions elsewhere or further training. And what's being accomplished by the program, according to the report from The Conference Board of Canada, is not only career preparation for a specific group of young people but a generation of role models for others.

"Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan have traditionally gone into teaching, social work and health services," states the report. "High schools have not recruited people in science and math."

Partly because of initiatives like the electronics program, however, a new generation of Aboriginal parents is "encouraging their children to take math and science because they now recognize the importance of these subjects."

SaskTel has undertaken negotiations with potential partners in such sectors as forestry, mining and oil and gas to establish comparable training programs of their own; in response, the company has received expressions of interest from a number of major organizations, including paper giant Weyerhaeuser and SaskPower.

Meanwhile, there are plans for the Careers in Electronics program to be offered at a number of locations in Saskatchewan to allow students to participate without being uprooted from their home communities.

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David Lewis, founder of Taybridge Communications, says Aboriginal people can be at the forefront of the IT boom with proper training in science and math.

First Nations Buying Group's strength is numbers

Curiously, the opening lines in Michael Birch's resume tend to catch a reader's throat.

"I did not continue my formal education after Grade 11," writes the once-timid man from Garden Hill First Nation in northern Manitoba, but "rather chose to educate myself through a process of trial and error."

This trial and error process cost him over \$1-million and it could have been avoided if it had a business degree.

That unconventional commencement to a resume has a distinct uplink in its conclusion: Birch, just 32, is today a successful Winnipeg entrepreneur.

His First Nations Buying Group, the only such Aboriginal brokerage in Manitoba and perhaps the largest in the country, has grown like a brush fire and in just over two years, signing deals with Xerox, Grand & Toy and Manitoba Telecommunications Services, among others.

Not the expected career trajectory for a knock-kneed kid from the reserve.

"When I came out of the North, I was just a shy, terrified individual," says Birch, who in these days is accustomed to speak at Aboriginal schools and community settings. "I wasn't used to mainstream business."

He learned in a hurry. Birch's Aboriginal Beverages Company was a going concern for four years in the mid-90s until the price war between Pepsi and Coke, along with a plummeting Canadian dollar, gave him his costly first diploma from the school of hard knocks.

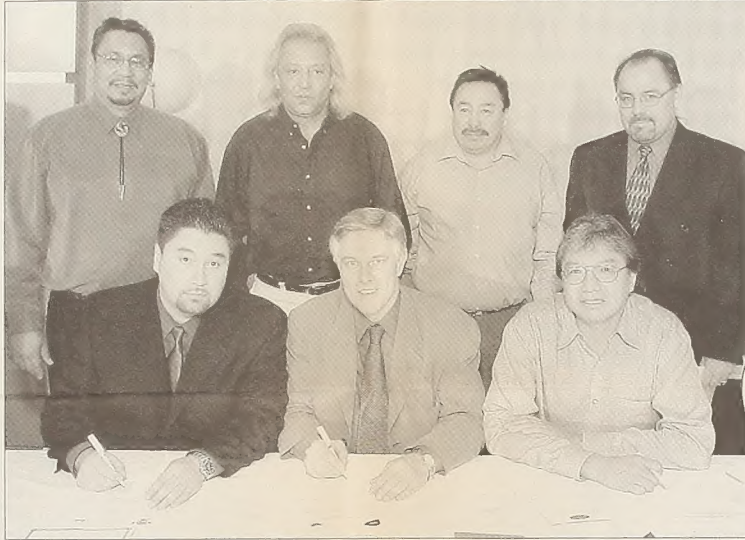
His second, remarks Birch, "I said to myself, there isn't a lot of margin in this business as it is. Instead of making myself sick, I have an existing infrastructure here in Winnipeg I can use."

Birch well knew that the Aboriginal presence in Manitoba was substantial, roughly 10 per cent of the overall population with over 100,000 people.

First Nations communities in the province, spending tens of millions of dollars on telecommunications, office supplies and other goods.

"I thought, we've got 60 reserves here, but what aren't we buying together?" says Birch, adding that Winnipeg itself, with some 50,000 Aboriginal residents, could be considered Canada's largest reserve.

His well-publicized soft drink company had already won Birch a high profile in the province, both with Aboriginal communities and



Signing an agreement with the First Nations Buying Group recently are, rear, left to right: Grand Chief Vern Rocco, Anishnabek Nation; Grand Chief Leon Jordan, Grand Council Treaty #3; Grand Chief Stan Beard, Nishnawbe-Aski Nation; Grand Chief Larry Saul, Association of Iroquois and Allied Nations; and front, left to right: Michael Birch, President, First Nations Buying Group; Terry Mosey, President, Bell Ontario; Vice Chief Charles Fox, Office of the Ontario Regional Chief.

beyond that would prove valuable.

The crunch was that Birch was facing a year of transition to get the buying group going while continuing to pay out over \$150,000 in wages to his staff.

Following his usual approach, he declined to seek more loans and just pounded the pavement while keeping alive such other paying interests as a convenience store in his community.

"We were a number of the key suppliers, MTS (the provincial phone utility), Grand & Toy," says Birch. "We needed to convince these corporate bigwigs that this was the way to go."

But Birch, together with First Nations Buying Group director Barry Gibson, also had to convince his

own community. Early on, he won a critical ally — Rod Bushie, Grand Chief of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, which represented all the provincial bands.

"One of the biggest mandates of the Grand Chiefs' platform was economic development," explains Birch, who says Bushie saw business sense in the plan quickly.

Yet while Bushie's support was important, all the individual Chiefs of the participating First Nations would also have to sign on, which was far from automatic.

"In the beginning, it was a chicken and the egg problem," observes Gibson, meaning that the company initially had no suppliers to offer the Chiefs and no Chiefs to offer the suppliers. Moreover, a key

to getting signatures was that the bands not be compelled to use the offered services, only committing to a modest membership fee that would entitle them to participate.

MTS couldn't long resist the apparent virtue of the approach: the phone company had block long-distance calling deals with sundry carriers, including various Chambers of Commerce, "but the business we represent to MTS is bigger than all the other groups combined," Gibson notes.

Discount dealing for the tribal signatories soon followed, along with savings of about 40 per cent off catalogue costs with Grand & Toy and other block deals with Budget auto rental, Xerox, General Western Star Trucks, Fast Air char-

ter services and a host of other firms.

With just the original four staff at First Nations Buying Group, Winnipeg, the business has already extended its reach to Ontario.

There, a deal involving Aboriginal communities and Bell Canada has been struck, with former national Aboriginal leader Phil Fontaine helping represent the First Nations Buying Group effort.

Birch says Quebec and British Columbia are next in his sights.

"I really look at all this as being without any territorial boundaries," says Birch.

"Just because we're from Manitoba, that should have no bearing. Aren't we all fighting for the same things?"

Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner launched as first Inuit feature film

Zacharius Kunuk made the journey to Montreal 20 years ago with some of his carvings in hand. He returned home to Igloolik without them.

What he was clutching on that return journey instead was a Sony Betamax video camera. Two decades later, Kunuk has just completed work on Canada's first feature film made by Aboriginal people in an Aboriginal community and took in an Aboriginal language, Inuktitut.

"In 1996 we started to write a script based on Inuit legend," says veteran documentary filmmaker Kunuk, 43, whose Igloolik Inuit Productions with the late screenwriter Paul Apak and producer Norval Cohen are preparing to distribute the \$2-million dramatic feature *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*.

"This is one of the famous legends we kept hearing about throughout our childhood," he continues. "It was seven or eight Elders telling the same story but the way they tell it is sort of in ridges

from season to season."

The action-revenge tale set five centuries ago climaxes with the runner of the title fleeing naked across the Arctic ice with several men in pursuit.

If the original oral history here had its conundrums, financing a Native-language production on this legend in Igloolik seemed almost unsolvable at times. "There are three envelopes for funding at Telefilm Canada," Kunuk explains. "The first is for English-language production with something like \$64-million, then French-language production with about \$34-million and Aboriginal production with something like \$2-million for the whole country."

"In the Aboriginal envelope, each production was capped at \$100,000 (in Inuktitut support). That would never make a movie."

After a series of discussions, Telefilm offered increased financing from its general fund. The National Film Board had already signed on as co-producer, CBC entered the agreement and sundry support

came from the territorial government, Aboriginal Peoples Television Network and Aboriginal corporations.

The result, two hours and 41 minutes in length, is a unique achievement that is already garnering international interest from film festivals, art museums and universities, the kinds of places where smaller Inuit productions had already made their home. Canadian distribution and airing for *Atanarjuat* is still being scheduled.

"All the props, all the clothes, everything for this movie is made in Igloolik," says Kunuk, who also cast the actors and found the crew in Igloolik.

"Not only are the materials indigenous, the creative talent and labour are Aboriginal. Inuit painter Cohn says the aesthetic is itself something entirely different than conventional North American film-making — the very thing that drew videographer Cohn from New York to Igloolik when he first saw Kunuk's short documentaries for tele-

vision 15 years ago.

"I thought (the Inuit) were using television in a way that was original instead of imitative. That was storytelling without being didactic," recalls Cohn, now a Nunavut resident who does much of the business travel to the southern cities for Inuit. "It was different than the North American model of TV which is pretty overbearing and word-based."

What Cohn calls alternative community-based TV "kind of disappeared in the 80's except that it seemed it could still be a reality in the North." Pursuing that prospect, Igloolik Inuit Productions was intended to make television and film that would "stick to the basic principles," says Cohn. "Those are cultural self-representation and professional, community-based filmmaking."

That corresponded exactly to where Kunuk himself had come, having started with an interest in still photography, serving a number of years with the Inuit Broadcasting

Corporation but eventually developing a determination to render Inuit storytelling in his own way.

Cultural authenticity has been an imperative for many community members in Igloolik. In two referendums in the 70's to determine if television services should be brought to his region, Kunuk replied, "We voted the TV out because it was all in English and our Elders felt 'What's the use?' In 1981 I got my camera because I heard that in another community (Inuit) what was then part of Northwest Territories someone else was doing things with video. I wanted to videotape my father going out to the hunt. He would come back, drink tea at the table, talking about the day."

Sometimes when Kunuk would look at the videotapes he made in those early days, he would see children from the community pressing their faces against his window, looking in. Completing a feature-length run has taken time in Igloolik, but Kunuk has always known he was on the right track.

Blood Tribe members share \$67-million enterprise

Visitors from 15 countries around the world have shown up to watch farmers' fields being watered in southern Alberta just above the Montana border.

Those fields, in turn, are producing special high-grade crops that also journey around the globe.

The fulcrum of this unexpected international exchange is the Blood Tribe Agricultural Project, which has spanned many decades and many political agreements in becoming an Aboriginal model of foresight and innovation in reserve land use.

"We have now developed and built Canada's largest irrigation project," declares Gibson, Blood general manager and one of the 6,500 tribal members who share in the 10,000-hectare, \$67-million enterprise.

The critical juncture in the story of this accomplishment came in 1947 when district irrigation authorities approached the tribe to relinquish land. They were seeking to further the St. Mary's Reservoir development south of Lethbridge for the benefit of surrounding farmers. The response from the Blood Tribe was yes — in exchange for a future commitment to be aided in irrigating a vast tract of its own lands.

The tribe's leadership was very astute, believes Blood. "The tribe saw the importance of trying to develop irrigation on the reserve and knew that the issue of access to reserve land was a politically delicate issue."

Many twists and turns would still ensue, with the federal government, irrigation responsibilities over to the province, several reworkings of the original deal with the Bloods and intensive environmental audits done. But in 1959 the three governments — federal, provincial and tribal — signed on for a six-phase development, collectively kicking in \$41-million at the outset.

With about 80 per cent of the intended area now operational, the long-term value of the project to this First Nations community is already apparent. Leasing dry land to area farmers would earn the Bloods about \$76 a hectare per season; irrigated fields are now earning \$370 a hectare, particularly with the Bloods' state-of-the-art computerized operation.

"It's not just a matter of unskilled labour," notes Blood of the operation he oversees. "There are highly-skilled professionals that are being developed here."

Success has momentum. When the Bank of Nova Scotia wanted to see 10-year commitments from the tenant farmers before supporting the Bloods' \$5-million purchase of high-tech water pivots, the Bloods secured them readily, upping tenancy obligation from what it had been two seasons in the past.

Timothy hay is a high-price livestock feed favoured by Asian farmers. It's grown on irrigated fields, the like of which are processed and compressed in the Blood plant, trucked to Calgary, shipped by rail to Vancouver and loaded into container ships. From there it goes out to Taiwan, Korea and Japan, becoming, as it were, of the Blood Tribe's remarkable stewardship of their lands.

Tin Wis resort caters to huge tourist market

At a cove called Tin Wis, just south of Tofino on the west coast of Vancouver Island, sits a residential school for First Nations children. It was closed in 1982 but has since been made into a RCMP project on alleged abductions.

This bleak piece of local history, paradoxically, is set in one of the most beautiful places in Canada, what is now the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. And now the shore of the cove has been won back for the service of a constructive Aboriginal future.

In reclaiming Tin Wis ("calm waters"), a landing place for those who hunt and fish, the local Tla-o-qui-ah First Nations has proceeded to create one of the most successful Aboriginal tourism operations in the country.

Today's Tin Wis Best Western Resort Lodge has recently expanded to 86 rooms and will generate some \$3-million in revenues this year. About 70 per cent of the summer season staff is Aboriginal, turning around extremely high rates of local employment.

Moreover, as the resort increasingly incorporates Aboriginal culture in its programming and ambience, the lodge is itself becoming an international attraction.

"It's growing. I'm busier this year than I was the year before, and last year more than the year before for most of the year," says Cuthand.

"Best Western is a name brand that is known all over the world," notes George Ateio, the Aboriginal assistant manager who has been there since the 1984 opening and who is being groomed to run the resort. "But working hand-in-hand has been not only good for us but good for the land."

Not everyone believed that such a partnership could have even been brokered. In the first place, getting the capital to build the resort was a steep challenge for the First Nation since the property had been given reserve status in 1991 and couldn't be used as collateral.

Howard Tom, chair of the Tin Wis Board of Directors, has previously explained that, "It was still Crown land and no bank would touch us for security reasons."

Instead, the First Nation turned to the Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council, a 14-nation assembly that Tin Wis also belongs to. The Nuu-chah-nulth Economic Development Corporation had a pension fund which could be used for such a purpose.

It was then that the idea emerged that a potential Tin Wis franchise was lined up to become a resort of Best Western, the deal was made.

Tla-o-qui-ah First Nations members have credited strong tribal governance for winning the association with the multinational hotel chain, a relationship which immediately gave the resort the benefits of global marketing and operational expertise. Few corporate organizations could have done what Best Western would have embraced such a franchise, or allowed it the scope for such intended programs as the storytelling and the traditional and indigenous food preparation.

"Best Western was a very good choice because it's the only one of the major chains that gives you the latitude and freedom to develop your own identity," says Lynden MacMartin, the current general manager who is preparing Ateio to become the next successor.

MacMartin, who has been in the hotel business for 24 years, says the governance of the Tin Wis resort rests with the community, not the corporation. "It's not a narrow business, rather than a more narrow business interest."

"I don't report to one owner or a group of owners," he says.

"Here I report to a group of directors, and three of the elected board are to be First Nations people."

The resort's success, with up to 80 rooms and a summer camp, during Tofino swells to quadruple its year-round population of 1,200. From such European countries as Germany, more than 100,000 tourists have expressed interest through surveys in having an experience with Aboriginal culture.

An original businesses move to fore in Yukon

As land claims are being settled in Yukon Territory, Aboriginal businesses, a priority for the region's First Nations, are coming to the fore.

An essential equation is that Aboriginal economic development generates the revenues for Aboriginal self-government, notes Brian Luzzar, general manager of the Yukon Indian Development Corporation (YIDC) in Whitehorse.

"It's also about jobs and the opportunity for good jobs," says Luzzar. "Today, there are quite a few First Nations people working in the service sector, and in government."

Luzzar sees this growth from several vantage points. First, YIDC is now

being restructured to include all 14 Yukon-based First Nations, as well as three northern B.C. communities in the region, for the purpose of joint ventures and investment.

Luzzar is also a manager at Dana Naye Ventures, an Aboriginal Capital Corporation that supports Yukon businesses, and he heads economic development for the Carcross/Tagish First Nation in the Territory. They have undertaken one of those modest-scale but significant ventures that are bolstering the Aboriginal economy, in this case purchasing a service centre that includes a gas station, restaurant, laundromat and recreational vehicle park. The 1998 purchase was accomplished with a \$250,000 grant from Indian and Northern Af-

fair Canada, a \$250,000 loan from Dana Naye and \$300,000 loaned by the Carcross/Tagish First Nation, which keeps business and governance issues separate.

Called Montana Services, the centre is now generating annual revenues over \$1.5 million, well above previous levels. And while profitability is a high priority, it isn't the only one.

"I would be more profitable to close Montana Services for four months in the winter," Luzzar explains, "but no, we provide a service to the community and we provide jobs."

In other parts of Yukon, new projects have been created by Kwinn Dun First Nation, which constructed a gas station and store

in Whitehorse, and Selkirk First Nation, which built the Pelly Crossing Community Business Centre featuring a cluster of roadside amenities.

"The need for this kind of facility was quite obvious," remarks Alex Morrison, Selkirk First Nation member and a lead consultant on the project. "But this was a contract that was developed over five or seven years."

Partners considering the \$1.3-million Pelly Crossing project were Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Aboriginal Business Canada (an initiative of Industry Canada) and the territorial government, combining with natural-gas royalties that had accrued to the First Nations.

"This is basically the best facility along the Klondike highway," says Morrison. "It's a long-term benefit for the Selkirk First Nation and for the people of the Yukon, I believe. Over the last 10 or 12 years in the Yukon, things have been more positive, with more responsibility [for Aboriginal governance] shifting from Ottawa to here."

There's First Nation pride in the territory these days, says Luzzar, over businesses like RAB Energy Group Inc., a \$6-million firm that manufactures thermal windows and has plants in both Whitehorse and Anchorage, Alaska. Two years ago, the company was bought by eight First Nations. It shows good profitability and it now has Aboriginal managers who are moving up in the operation.

Putting Saskatchewan in the big picture

The locals tried to explain to Doug Cuthand that movies were made by white people in Hollywood, but for some reason he thought they could be made by Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan.

He was right.

"I think we're getting a critical mass in this industry here," says Cuthand, speaking from his Blue Hill Productions office in Saskatoon. "It's growing. I'm busier this year than I was the year before, and last year more than the year before for most of the year."

Indeed, filmmaking in Saskatchewan is becoming sufficiently familiar that the Royal Bank recently announced the purchase of a 50 per cent share of the \$300,000 Cuthand needed for a digital video camera, which produces broadcast-quality images at a fraction of previous costs.

"It used to be hard to talk to somebody at the banks here about the film industry," offers Cuthand with a friendly laugh.

Not that he is always figured to be having such conversations. Cuthand actually came to documentary filmmaking through print journalism. It's been a marriage of sensibilities that has served him well. On the same day in June last year he was formally acknowledged in the fields.

Cuthand's documentary on urban Aboriginal youth, *Circle of Voices*, won him the Banff Television Festival's best English-language Aboriginal production award. While in Fort Lauderdale he was recognized for writing the best script column in a non-Native publication by the Native American Journalists Association.

"From the very beginning, since I was a student, I was always interested in storytelling," says Cuthand,



Saskatchewan's Doug Cuthand has been honoured for both his filmmaking with Blue Hill Productions and his journalism at the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix.

a member of the Little Pine First Nation who studied liberal arts at Simon Fraser University in the late 60's. That's the one common thread. And when I got into video, I

saw how you could layer the thing — with so many additional ways — to tell the story."

Cuthand started as his first full-time editor for the Alberta-based

Native People periodical, returning to Saskatchewan in the 70's for a decade-long stint writing newspaper columns on Aboriginal issues for the Regina Leader-Post and Saskatoon Star-Phoenix.

After being invited to work as a co-producer on a video of an Aboriginal theatre project, however, he became hooked on a medium he had previously viewed as inferior to print.

The resulting one-hour TV documentary, *Theatre for Change*, won several awards.

In the dozen years since Cuthand formed Blue Hill Productions — named for a revered landmark on his home reserve — he has gone on to produce and direct a number of critically-acclaimed documentaries on Aboriginal life that have aired through educational broadcasting and on the international Peoples Television Network. Cuthand was an easy choice as co-producer on *Big Bear*, a two-part CBC mini-series about the Cree of Saskatchewan.

"I'm busy now, so many projects, and they're all Aboriginal based," says Cuthand, who is currently working on *Home*, a 13-part TV series on Aboriginal children who were removed from their families and raised by foster parents or in institutions.

Home's become a big place for this filmmaker from the reserve; if business is increasingly global, so is cultural collaboration.

Cuthand was invited to a festival of Aboriginal film in Australia a year ago and is now exploring project opportunities with co-producers on the other side of the world.

"It's really amazing in this industry," he enthuses. "It's a worldwide industry now and you have to be working internationally."

Kitsaki Development Corporation has become Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership, a highly diversified entity.

Managing a timely use of the federal government's Aboriginal Procurement Strategy has helped lead Kitsaki to a series of strategic partnerships in the region and beyond that have resulted in profits in a host of major industries.

Beyond partnerships with other companies, the Band's strategy calls for cooperative deals with virtually all potential stakeholders.

"We work with labour unions as well, and three of our companies are unionized," remarks Kitsaki CEO Ray McKay, also a Lac La Ronge Band member and a former provincial government deputy minister.

"We work with business in the community, we have very good relations with the [local town] mayors. We're not just a government, we're a larger partner that is successful."

Northern Resources Trucking, for example, is a partnership between Kitsaki and the local town of other Aboriginal communities in the province with Trimac Transportation, a major North American trucking company.

Kevatim Mining involves Athabasca First Nations and Kitsaki with Procon Mining and Tunneling to provide services to that industry in the province.

In other cases, Kitsaki is the sole owner, such as with the snack products company, Kevatim Meats, or is partnered only with Aboriginal firms as in First Nations Insurance Services.

Good's personal experiences reflect some of this eclecticism. He lived for a time in Regina, was a journeyman welder, built homes, was self-employed.

"I enjoyed it, he reflected Chief Cook.

"I made a good living. And I know that many of our community members understand what we're doing [through Kitsaki] and appreciate the opportunities that are made available to them."

Kitsaki continues to grow — current ventures range from pursuing the European market for wild rice to having 100 Band members set training in forestry — Chief Cook knows community needs will expand as quickly.

"We run kindergarten to Grade 12 in all of our communities here, and we also control our post-secondary education," he comments.

"We try to prioritize post-secondary education for all of our people who can do it."

"Sixty per cent of our population is less than 25 years old. The process of creating opportunities over time but we do have a lot of hope."

Sawmills in the bush was modest first step 30 years ago

A modest but critical step towards self-reliance for the Rainy River First Nations came with the opening of a sawmill in the bush over 30 years ago.

"This started in the late 60s," recounts Chief Jim Leonard of the First Nation's community, situated at the western edge of Ontario just above the Minnesota border. "Like many [First Nations] communities across the country, we had a lot of people who were looking for employment to the United States, working in logging camps and so on. The community was very poor."

Chief Leonard says the Nation's Manitou Sawmill — Manitou is the Ojibwa word for spirit — was expanded in 1974 and has since developed into a major employer in the U.S. for such value-added wood products as wall paneling and flooring. The operation keeps busy enough to challenge the local economy of the 23 square-kilometre community, which has about 250 members.

"Today, we have a profitable

company, fully computerized with dry kilns and planers," Chief Leonard says. "It employs 30 to 40 people in the busy time during the winter. We have double shifts in summer. There's about 25 people working there."

Keys to the success of the sawmill, he believes, have been the gradual expansion of its scope as Rainy River First Nations developed the necessary expertise, and strong relationships between the First Nations community and surrounding municipalities.

A good foundation in the one business, moreover, has encouraged the development of new enterprises, with the last five years seeing the start at Rainy River of a sausage hatchery and window manufacturing plant.

"Our unemployment rate is now zero — everybody who wants to work has work," declares Chief Leonard. "Our total payroll is somewhere around 80 to 90 people. In busy season we have to import people from outside the community!"

Direction to create the recent ventures came directly from First Nation members, explains the chief executive officer for the Rainy River businesses.

"The hatchery started as an idea to protect the sturgeon here, but it was also part of the culture for ceremonial purposes," says David Paul Achneepneukim.

"People said we should not leave this to anybody else, but that we should do it ourselves."

The maturing of the fish for market will still take several years, but Rainy River meanwhile markets some of its hatchlings to other operations.

And starting the window-making plant, initially a joint venture, was involved case of Rainy River First Nations taking charge of its own needs.

"Housing is a major aspect of people's lives here and Rainy River was buying [building] material from places like Winnipeg," Achneepneukim remarks.

"Really, it wasn't benefiting our own people."

Instead, Rainy River got nine First Nations in the region to agree to purchase windows from the plant, which was begun in 1995 with a five-year deal with a Manitoba firm which owned 25 per cent of the operation.

Their role was to transfer the skills, the technology to our people," says Achneepneukim, noting that the community has taken full ownership of the business.

Meanwhile, even the Rainy River cultural heritage has become a major outreach to the rest of the world, with the creation of a visitors' centre near the site of the Manitou Mounds. The latter Aboriginal mound has prehistoric prominence, some as high as 12 metres, are found at Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung, "place of the long rapids, and mark a sacred terrain of early Aboriginal settlement and ceremony."

It represents a premise that increasing numbers of First Nations are remarking: to protect a proud past, take care of the future.

Caribou steaks served up in Florida

The recipe for their delicacies is 1,000 years old and the food has to travel a continent to end up on a plate.

That's the ambitious business plan of Nunavut Arctic Foods in Northern Quebec, whose caribou pate and steaks are on upscale menus in such remote locales as Casablanca and London.

Nunavut comprises 666,000 square kilometres north of Quebec's 55th parallel, which puts the Arctic Food company at a considerable distance from almost all its customers. What is it proximal to, however, is a very old way of life, here revisited for the purpose of contemporary businesses.

At the first inhabitants of North America who were their forefathers, Inuit hunters set out in mid-

February to hunt and harvest up to 3,800 animals for the company, today employing the modern aid of portable abattoirs. The carcasses are frozen and sent out by Air Inuit, a sister company within the Makivik Corporation which runs a host of Inuit enterprises in the region.

"There are no antibiotics and no hormones in this meat, which is quite an issue these days," says Neil Greig, Arctic Foods general manager in Kuujuaq.

"Caribou is a mean Nunavut Arctic Foods has had an easy time of it since launching its pilot effort in the winter of 1996-97."

"Caribou is an industry that is very small and the meat is very expensive to harvest," remarks Greig. "We spend a considerable amount of effort on promotion, keying on trade

shows such as food and beverage shows. It's a cross between trade and public education for us."

Getting the harvest up to a quantity where the outfit could assure the customers of a steady supply was one issue, and not a simple one, given the unpredictability of the annual herd migration. The company has also invested considerably in an upscale niche market, including resorts in settings like Banff and Vail and on cruise ships.

Moreover, these upmarket clients initially were only interested in the prime cuts from the fleshy hindquarters of the animals. The aim was to have a steady supply of energy in developing and promoting such products as the burgers, sausages and pate that can make use of the rest of the meat.

All this adds up to a challenging way to harvest relatively modest revenues. Significantly, however, the company has directly employed 100 people in traditional hunting.

"We have very few employees outside of the community," says Greig.

"Now there are more and more local people involved in these types of projects, and that's good. That's what it's all about."

This was a significant impetus behind the creation of parent Makivik Corporation, formed in 1998 by the amalgamation of all the First Nations in Quebec City, following the conclusion of the historic James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement three years earlier.

Anabasca Tribal Council inks historic oil sands deal

This time, the First Nations of northeastern Alberta are making sure they get their own chance, as it were, to tap a gusher.

With an anticipated \$25-billion expansion of the Athabasca oil sands underway, the Athabasca Tribal Council of five First Nations has brought about the signing of an historic deal with one of the world's largest corporations.

Development programs will be unfolding for years to come and there is a myriad of specific not yet fully anticipated, let alone planned for. But the crux of the matter is that the Athabasca Tribal Council (ATC) has spurred the development of a capacity-building agreement with such giant developers as Mobil Oil, Shell, Gulf, Suncor Canada, Petro-Canada and Syncrude Canada.

- Key elements include:
 - Support for First Nations development of environmental assessment and consulting capacity for the oil sands development.
 - Aboriginal employment and training initiatives tied to the expansion.
 - Providing for skills development

including education and health care.

• Providing for technical training to maintain physical infrastructure in First Nations communities;

- Further long-term benefits to be determined that will continue beyond the period of resource extraction.

While ATC believes its people are clearly benefitting from this landmark agreement, the benefits are far from one-sided. While the region's First Nations clearly want training and jobs, their private-sector partners have evident self-interest in nurturing the skills in an Aboriginal working-age population that is growing over twice as fast as the national average.

Among other things, supporting social and physical infrastructure furthers the development of a stable workforce, while without local environmental consultation and sensitivity, development could be greatly hindered or blocked.

"We have come through a lot of trials and growing pains in the last couple of years," says Marlene Poi-

tras, chief executive officer for ATC in Fort McMurray and a member of the Mikisew Cree of Fort Chipewyan.

But because this is all so new for us, we couldn't see everything that would come out of this. We are still going through the issues."

Skill, what has been accomplished to date has won praise from ATC's business partners, the federal government and within the First Nations.

Suncrude Canada, for one, has noted the participation of Alberta-Pacific Forest Industries in the capacity-building agreement as evidence that the deal is cross-industry lines to ensure lasting benefits for First Nations.

"We don't see this as a one-shot, short-term kind of deal," Suncrude executive vice-president Phil LaChambre said, indicating that plans will call for economic activity beyond the oil sands extraction.

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada has committed up to \$750,000 in support until 2001 for First Nations' economic development and

infrastructure enhancement in the region, believing that the Athabasca expansion can further self-reliance for Aboriginal communities.

The agreement came to fruition through the efforts of the Alberta regional office of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. The office, through a close working relationship with the provincial government and its support, was able to pinpoint areas of economic development and infrastructure that would facilitate growth.

The hard-working Poitras, whose strong working relationships with the various chiefs helped put her in the CEO role in 1997, believes there was sincerity on both sides of the negotiations that led to the agreement.

"The imbalances were evident but the will to work together was there," says Poitras, one of a growing number of strong role models for young Aboriginal women. "We always managed to work through the issues to everyone's satisfaction. The agreement is good."

Chief Jim Boucher, president of

the ATC board of directors, feels ATC has negotiated an "impressive list" of understandings, including five environmental agreements and four socio-economic agreements with seven companies. Chief Boucher believes the capacity-building deal gives First Nations members jobs, business contracts, cultural preservation projects, respect for Aboriginal understanding of the environment and more. In turn, the companies are getting access to the community's contacts, means to get development done without needless delay and an understanding that lets them work with greater certainty.

Relationships work in two directions. Athabasca-area companies are now thinking about Aboriginal people before they act. And vice versa. When teenaged Leonard Black graduated from Chipewyan Prairie Dene High School last year, he was a member of the "career goals." To become a heavy equipment operator and secure permanent employment with Suncrude," he responded.

Private-public partnership a model for Aboriginal people

The impending creation of Canada's Nunavut Territory on April 1, 1999 launched a private-public partnership in the Arctic region that has been a model for circum-polar nations around the world.

The premise was that a new territorial government would require 13,500 square-metres of offices and 250 housing units for employees, spread out among 11 Arctic communities.

This challenge was turned into an opportunity which has created a major Nunavut corporation with over \$130-million in assets, and even a significant kick-start to the local Inuit economy.

"The main goal was to maximize the benefits in the North," recounts Brian Bies, project manager for the effort with Public Works and Government Services Canada, the technical advising body to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada on the north.

"We could have gone to the southern construction companies but they would not have used local resources in the same way," adds Bies from Ottawa.

The 1996 partnering agreement for the four-year project came out of the land claims agreement that created Nunavut itself. It paired the Government of Canada with Nunavut Tunngavik Inc., the corporation that spearheaded economic development for Inuit in the region. To actually build the structures, a Nunavut Construction Corp. (NCC) was created by bringing together four existing Nunavut firms.

"We did it as a community-based investment strategy," explains Bies. "We thought it was better to lease space from NCC than to build structures. The upfront cost was lower and the benefit to the private-sector partner, who would get to own the properties and maintain them."

Holding the promise of leases



The new territorial government in Nunavut needed 13,500 square-metres of offices and 250 housing units for employees, providing a \$130-million injection into the local economy.

from the government tenants and would be using the space, NCC executives needed to travel from Igloolik to Toronto to support the undertaking.

"One of the challenges for the corporation was to raise financing for the project in excess of \$130-million from the reserved funds of the federal government," says Tagak Curley, the Inuit president of NCC — now Nunavut Investment Group — who started out by himself but during the course of the project needed to create 600 full-time jobs.

"This broke new ground on Bay Street," continues Curley, who engaged KPMG LLP for the process. "There were no government guarantees but we had 20-year leases with the federal government, and that was strong security for the financing."

The government's commitment to NCC for Nunavut's largest-ever capital project was earned by the company, Curley adds.

This was negotiated, it wasn't a given. We had to make a completely marketable proposal and a

sound business."

The NCC structures were done under budget and completed last March, one year sooner than had been projected. Most important was the way in which they were created and the impact they have on the local economy.

Prior to this, most construction companies would go into a company here and end up with 10-to-15 per cent local hires," says Eugene Levy, executive vice-president of NCC. "The first year we hired 80 per cent local people and

instituted an apprenticeship training program. We were able to do things on a competitive basis but in a way so we involved the private sector of the North."

Adds Curley, "right from the beginning we hired a specialist for labour and training. That person worked with the communities and pretty well had an idea about who was interested in training. We were not so much interested in unskilled labour. Some of these people who worked with us have now got permanent jobs with other agencies or with government. That work force is now here and it's quite evident that these people are not going to remain timid in their own communities when other projects are undertaken."

Having Inuit management was an important breakthrough. Notes Bies: "There were a lot of skits on the ground in Nunavut but there wasn't a lot of people who were being used at the higher levels [in infrastructure development]."

It was the Aboriginals in the North to have an Inuit person running a project."

The legacy of the undertaking, which brought NCC and INAC a national award of merit for innovation and excellence in infrastructure from the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships, went beyond the structures now housing the territorial government. NCC, now as Nunavut Investment Group, had \$12-million in bids this past winter construction season for everything from housing to schools and health clinics.

So impressive were the local hiring practices developed for the big partnership project that the company has been engaged to take part in the creation of a 40-unit apartment complex in the city of Inuvik.

"We are going to create the global economy," says Curley.

Muskog Lake Cree created urban reserve for development

Ground-breaking agreement established new guidelines for Saskatchewan First Nation

Lester Lafond can tell you off the top of his head that it took four years and two months to complete the negotiations. In press interviews, he could probably pinpoint the additional weeks and days as well.

What has fixed the experience in the minds of Saskatchewan residents was not only the complexity of what Muskog Lake Cree Nation was attempting but its ground-breaking nature. Just over a decade ago, the band secured approval to launch Canada's first urban reserve created explicitly for commercial development.

"At that time there were really no guidelines," recounts Lafond, lead business adviser to the First Nation in setting the 1989 precedent. "We had to sort of shop around each of the issues."

Today, the 35-acre reserve within municipal boundaries has just seen the \$3-million Central Centre of office building and the \$12-million Kocals Transport Ltd. headquarters added to its expense. The new structures join McKnight Commercial Centre and Veterans' Plaza, the first tangible results of the Muskog Lake venture which were erected in 1991.

This fresh phase of development creates work space for another 200 employees, most of them Aboriginal, and what has raised the Muskog Lake Cree Nation's profile as Saskatchewan's model centre for

Aboriginal businesses. And Lafond says there's plenty of room for more development on the 20 acres that remain open on the reserve.

"One of the things we've learned," he reflects, "is that there are Aboriginal businesses out there looking for a [commercial] park where they can be comfortable."

What has made the Saskatchewan effort a meaningful case study for others, however, is not only that Aboriginal professionals and business people have been drawn to the park, but that the municipality at large has supported the undertaking from the start — and drawn pride from it.

Establishing a taxation approach that allows the band to collect revenue on its property at a rate comparable to other commercial developments has ensured that the park pays its way. Forty per cent of tax dollars from the park go to the city to defray service costs, equaling what municipal property tax would amount to. Well beyond getting its water and garbage collection expenses covered, Saskatchewan now has in the reserve a prominent success story in what is an increasingly vital economic resource for the province. Registering Aboriginal people, the youngest and fastest-growing population segment in Saskatchewan, comprised 14 per cent of the general population in a decade.

Economic development in the province is thus in no small part reliant on the kind of advances made by the Muskog Lake Cree.

"The business community at large gets a higher visibility when the band goes to the province," notes Lafond. "We've had visitors here from all over Canada."

Here's a brief overview of the steps that led to the development of Canada's first urban reserve created solely for economic development. Most important of federal criteria for allowing the project was that Muskog Lake Cree Nation get an agreement from the City of Saskatchewan relating to municipal services, taxes and by-laws.

That was a complicated matter, requiring intensive negotiations over a period of two years to arrange municipal services such as sewage and fire protection. But Lafond cites the matter of off-site development fees normally required by a municipality as an example of the City of Saskatchewan took from the start.

"Normally, a developer has to pay the off-sites immediately," Lafond adds. "We got a deferral on the off-sites. There are a lot of ways the city was very helpful in seeing this development get going."

The process that followed Indian Act regulations, which stipulate that reserve land can't simply be leased for commercial development, requires first that the Aboriginal community through a designation process first, which includes a referendum. This effort was successful in the City of Saskatchewan. Attracting commercial tenants to

Saskatchewan's wake-up call

Demographics speak loudly, they act as a wake up call — First Nations represent the young and fastest-growing segment of Saskatchewan's population.

• About 11 per cent of Saskatchewan's population are registered Indians.

• By 2011, there could be more than 130,000 registered Indians, representing 14 per cent of the population and more than one quarter of the primary school children in Saskatchewan.

• The non-Aboriginal population is aging. In fact, the average age of a farmer in Saskatchewan is 57 years old. The number of Aboriginals aged

35 to 54, who comprise the bulk of the workforce, is expected to grow over the next 20 years.

• Saskatchewan will be facing a workforce shortage in the not too distant future and there is a growing concern that the province largely depends on its ability to tap the potential of First Nations.

• Economic development is a significant challenge that has led to a 10 per cent decrease in the social assistance dependency rate on reserves over the last three years.

• There are now 15 per cent fewer recipients of social assistance in First Nations' communities than three years ago.

serve as collateral.

The historic Indian Act, which may see revision in years to come, could have anticipated an Aboriginals undertaking like a commercial park on the reserve.

In this case, Aboriginal business came forward to advance Aboriginal business, with the Peace Hills Trust, owned by Alberta's Samson Cree Nation, lending early development expertise.

That seemed to fit with everything that was intended for the project.

As former Muskog Lake Chief Harry Lafond said in contemplating Saskatchewan's urban reserve, "The answers to improving our quality of life and self-sufficiency are within ourselves."

Donna Cona's founder remains passionate crusader

John Bernard has been hooked on computers since 1981, but it was another four years before he listened to his calling as a business man.

Coming from the Madawaskas Mainfest First Nation of New Brunswick, Bernard found himself working for a government agency when he ended up one day visiting an Aboriginal community hall in northern Manitoba.

Someone came in with a bag of what initially looked like blood but proved to be red nail polish that a youngster had been sniffing.

"I asked him, 'What are you doing this?'" recounts Bernard, 42. "They said, 'Because the kids have nothing to do. If you have a job to offer us, we're all ears.'"

Bernard has a job to offer. As president of Donna Cona Inc. in Ottawa, he employs some 40 staff in his information technology firm, which also has an office in Vancouver. And with a federal Procurement Strategy for Aboriginal Business that creates strong incentives for Aboriginal hiring and ownership, Bernard says there are jobs in his field for as many skilled people from the community as come forward.

"Aboriginal people with any type of [systems engineering] certification get snapped up right away," he remarks.

Software development and systems integration certainly snapped Bernard's interest. Programming a "task" on a computer device he had seen in preparation for law school 20 years ago, Bernard suddenly noticed, "I didn't want to be a lawyer anymore."

A year ago he could make a gift of \$30,000 to Trent University to establish a computer science scholarship for Aboriginal students in information technology (IT) continues to hold great promise for those who get the education to pursue it, he believes, while education is of service for those pursuing other paths as well.

"I do a lot of speaking," says Bernard, who last year won the National Aboriginal Achievement Award in Business and Commerce as well as the Indigenous Business Person of the Year award from a leading Aboriginal business portal.

"I was on the road for almost two months last year visiting universities and Aboriginal students, really pushing high school."

"I tell the kids, 'I was in Grade 10, too, and I wanted to quit. But if you can't complete high school, what makes you think you can make it going to hire someone like you?'"

As for IT in particular, "the very first thing I have to do is convince them that it's not just a dead-end (three minutes)," notes Bernard. "I say 'Finish high school, if [IT] is not here today, it's going to be there by the time you graduate.'"

With an Aboriginal labour force growing at over twice the national average, a reliable route to well-paying jobs is no small thing to be pointing at.

Certainly, for the many people who emphasize the need for strong role models in the Aboriginal community, Bernard and his unflagging enthusiasm have been unavoidable.

He first began a company called Aboriginal Informatics Services in 1983 to do IT training on New Brunswick reserves, keeping the concern going while spending eight years in systems support for Ottawa's John S. Dymally Inc. In 1992, he kept bringing First Nations people into the IT career path. "I found his new position and resolved to do more."

By 1996, Aboriginal Informatics Services and Systems Interface Inc. had joined forces. Donna Cona was named for the Innuqois chief who first spoke the word Kennaitee (humility) to Jacques Cartier, giving this name to the company.

Bernard is Donna Cona's majority owner, with Sierra Systems Group acquiring a 49 per cent share in the company last year. The partnership has given Donna Cona a fast track to national prominence and international contracts for its various systems integration, technology training and Web development functions.

"Trying to own and run everything yourself is the biggest mistake you can make," says Bernard.

He's nonetheless been careful to adhere to the structural requirements demanded by the Procurement Strategy, his new, commercially valuable brand access to government contracts for qualified Aboriginal businesses.

Bernard emphasizes that his company contributes to the public purse and the economy like any other. "Donna Cona pays as much corporate tax as the company next to it, and I pay taxes."

Taybridge Communications suit les dernières tendances des technologies

L'emploi d'étudiant en pluralisme, David Lewis a été séduit par le Web et n'en a jamais déchanté. « J'ai commencé à explorer le Web bien avant que tout le monde s'y intéresse et j'ai toujours voulu travailler à mon compte », déclare M. Lewis, entrepreneur âgé de 34 ans, qui vit à Taymouth, près de Frédéricton, au Nouveau-Brunswick.

C'est en 1992 que M. Lewis a commencé à exploiter à temps partiel Taybridge Communications, son entreprise de technologies de l'information, mais depuis trois ans, il s'y consacre à plein temps.

Taybridge Communications s'occupe des aspects de la gestion de projets sur Internet, de la conception de sites Web et de la création de vidéos pour une clientèle diversifiée provenant exclusivement des États-Unis. Le marketing de Taybridge est à toutes fins pratiques identique au travail qu'elle a eu à effectuer par Internet. C'est ainsi qu'à partir de sa maison, M. Lewis a pu se débarrasser de clients sans jamais quitter son ordinateur.

de découper à l'emporte-pièce de la Caroline du Nord à NetObjects Inc., un fabricant de logiciels de la Californie.

« Les technologies de l'information issues à la fois de la révolution industrielle et de la nôtre vont l'être », ajoute M. Lewis, qui a grandi en Colombie-Britannique et qui a déménagé au Nouveau-Brunswick il y a neuf ans.

La mentalité du chercheur d'or s'est incarnée en avril dernier avec l'effacement des titres de haute technologie. Les choses finissent toujours par se remplacer et il n'en émanera que du bien. L'important est de s'organiser pour en profiter », poursuit-il.

Comme le genre d'entreprise de M. Lewis ne requiert qu'un modestes investissements en capital et lui permet de travailler à partir de son domicile, sa marge de profit éventuelle en sera accrue. M. Lewis a aussi bénéficié de près de 170 000 \$ provenant d'Entreprise autochtone Canada, une initiative d'Industrie Canada.

« Je tenais à offrir un service impeccable et très professionnel », précise M. Lewis.

qui est convaincu que c'est par la qualité que les jeunes peuvent se distinguer dans le milieu compétitif des technologies de l'information.

Malgré l'aptitude du marché, la demande de gens qualifiés en technologies de l'information demeure très forte au Canada. Pour les collectifs autochtones, elle représente à la fois une porte d'entrée et un défi de taille, car les technologies et les sciences n'ont pas toujours été valorisées dans les programmes d'études. En outre, le taux d'inscription est encore faible dans les domaines liés à la haute technologie.

Pour surmonter plusieurs obstacles, des efforts concertés de plusieurs organismes s'efforcent d'offrir un bon exemple. Le Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technology a conçu un programme d'électronique, qui a reçu l'appui d'Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada, de Développement des ressources humaines Canada et de SaskTel.

Dans le cadre de ce programme, 23 étudiants autochtones ont été sélectionnés en

fonction de leur dossier scolaire, particulièrement selon les notes qu'ils avaient obtenues en anglais et en physique au secondaire. Ils ont suivi une formation au Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology, utilisant les nouvelles et l'équipement de la compagnie de télécommunications SaskTel.

Une fois leurs études terminées, ils se sont vu offrir un poste dans la compagnie. « J'ai pu gagner mon argent à l'arrivée de SaskTel et d'autres chercheurs du travail ailleurs ou poursuivre leur formation. Selon un rapport du Conférence Board du Canada, ce programme fait valoir beaucoup plus que simplement offrir une formation professionnelle, il permet aux jeunes qui y participent de devenir des modèles à suivre pour les autres.

Le rapport souligne entre autres que, depuis plusieurs années, les Autochtones en Saskatchewan ont eu tendance à se diriger vers l'enseignement et le travail social et les services de santé. Le recrutement en sciences et en mathématiques n'était pas une priorité pour les écoles de l'État, par exemple, en raison des initiatives

comme le programme d'électronique, les parents autochtones de la nouvelle génération ont encouragé leurs enfants à étudier les sciences et les mathématiques, étant conscients de l'importance de ces matières.

SaskTel a encouragé des négociations avec des partenaires d'outils dans les domaines de la forêt, des mines ainsi que du pétrole et du gaz afin que des programmes soient offerts dans ces domaines dans ces secteurs. De grandes organisations comme le géant du papier Weeyerhaeuser et le service public d'électricité SaskPower ont manifesté de l'intérêt pour ce programme.

Entre-temps, on envisage d'implanter le programme d'électronique à différents endroits en Saskatchewan afin de permettre à un plus grand nombre d'étudiants d'y participer sans pour autant les dériver de leur collectivité d'origine. L'exemple de David Lewis et Taybridge Communications prouve bel et bien qu'une fois les compétences acquises, elles peuvent nous être utiles à tout moment.

David Lewis, fondateur de Taybridge Communications, soutient que les peuples autochtones peuvent devenir des chefs de file dans les domaines liés aux technologies de l'information grâce à une formation adéquate en sciences et en mathématiques.

Les First Nations Buying Group : l'union fait la force

« J'ai terminé mes études secondaires en 11^e année, préférant poursuivre mon éducation à l'école de la vie. » Voilà d'ailleurs le curriculum vitae de Michael Birch, homme d'affaires timide, originaire de la Première nation de Garden Hill, au nord du Manitoba. En lisant ces quelques lignes, on ne peut que sourire.

L'écrit de la vie n'a pas fait perdre plus d'un million de dollars, comme je l'aurais pu enchaîner si j'avais décroché un diplôme en administration des affaires », admet-il aujourd'hui.

Bien que son entrée en matière soit peu conventionnelle, le curriculum vitae de M. Birch réserve aux lecteurs une intéressante conclusion. À l'âge de 32 ans, M. Birch est aujourd'hui un entrepreneur prospère de Winnipeg. En plus d'être la seule coopérative d'achat indienne au Manitoba, sa société, le First Nations Buying Group, est l'une des plus importantes au pays depuis deux ans, elle a connu une croissance exponentielle et elle fait aujourd'hui avec des grands noms, comme Xerox, Grand & Toy et la Manitoba Telecommunications Services.

On aurait pu penser qu'un petit Autochtone sorti tout droit de la réserve puisse suivre un tel cheminement professionnel. « Lorsque j'ai fait mon entrée dans le monde urbain, j'étais entièrement gêné, vous savez, raconte M. Birch, un cosmopolite que s'acharnaient des journalistes et les collectifs autochtones d'un peu partout. Je n'étais pas du tout familier avec la façon de faire des affaires. »

M. Birch n'a pas mis en place des tentatives à grande échelle, mais au cours des années 90, son commerce de boissons gazeuses, la Birch's Aboriginal Beverages Company, connaissant un franc succès. Et cette première de prospérité a duré quatre ans, jusqu'à ce que la Coca-Cola s'en mêle. C'est alors que Michael Birch a dû quitter la partie, l'accablant au pied du mur. « J'ai vite réalisé que ce marché me laissait peu de liberté d'action. Plutôt que de ronger les sangs, j'ai décidé d'apprendre à travers parts de l'infrastructure qui existait à Winnipeg », explique-t-il. M. Birch savait que pour réussir, il devait aller chercher ailleurs. Dans la province, les collectivités des Premières nations ont toujours été des clients de la téléphonie, les fournisseurs de bureau et d'autres biens et services.

« Deux ans après que je me suis débarrassé de la Coca-Cola, j'ai pu constater que les ressources des 60 réserves établies ici pouvaient M. Birch. À ses yeux, la ville



Ces gens d'affaires ont récemment signé une entente avec le First Nations Buying Group. À l'arrière, de gauche à droite : Vern Roote, grand chef de la nation anishnabek; le grand chef Leon Jourdain, représentant du Grand Conseil du Traité n° 3; Stan Beaudy, grand chef de la nation nishnawbe-aski; le grand chef Larry Saul, représentant de l'Association d'Iroquois et d'Alind Indiens. À l'avant, de gauche à droite : Michael Birch, président du First Nations Buying Group; Terry Mossey, président de Bell Ontario; Charles Fox, vice-chef du bureau du chef régional de l'Ontario.

de Winnipeg représente la plus vaste réserve au Canada, puisqu'elle regroupe quelque 50 000 résidents autochtones.

La publicité destinée à faire connaître son entreprise de boissons gazeuses a, par la même occasion, permis à M. Birch sous les feux de la rampe tant au sein des collectifs autochtones qu'ailleurs dans la province. Voilà un autochtone qui allait être utile à l'entreprise.

Mais il y avait un hic, durant l'année qui a précédé la création de la coopérative d'achats. M. Birch devait continuer de payer le salaire de ses employés, ce qui représentait une somme de fonds annuelle de plus de 150 000 \$. Il lui fallait une entreprise à son principe d'achat, un contrat un peu plus important. Il a néanmoins réussi à éviter tout déficit en puisant dans d'autres sources de revenus, notamment dans les profits que réalisait son dépanneur établi dans la réserve.

« Nous nous sommes trouvés vers de gros fournisseurs, tout particulièrement

la Manitoba Telecommunications Services et Grand & Toy, afin de les convaincre des avantages qu'ils pourraient en retirer en recourant à nos services. »

Toutefois, M. Birch et Barry Gibson, le directeur de la coopérative, devaient également invoquer des arguments infaillibles pour persuader leur propre collectivité. Rapidement, ils se sont trouvés un allié de poids : Rod Bushie, grand chef de l'Assemblée des chefs du Manitoba et porte-parole de toutes les collectivités autochtones de la province.

« À notre grande joie, le développement communautaire se trouvait au cœur des priorités du grand chef », explique M. Birch. Aussitôt, Rod Bushie a convenu du bien-fondé du projet.

Obtenir l'appui du grand chef représentait certes un atout non négligeable. Cependant, il fallait convaincre les chefs des Premières nations membres de l'Assemblée. La partie n'était pas gagnée d'avance.

De là dépend, tout étonné aux prises avec un problème que l'on pourrait

comparer à l'énigme de la poule et de l'œuf, fait observer M. Gibson. Comme pour nos avions nous ne pouvions pas nous appuyer sur eux pour leur fournir à présenter aux chefs et aux chefs à présenter aux fournisseurs. Par ailleurs, même si le chef signait un contrat d'adhésion avec la coopérative, nous n'obligait la Première nation à faire appel à ses services, comme les chantiers de cette dernière n'avaient qu'à verser les modestes frais d'adhésion au groupe.

La Manitoba Telecommunications Services a été l'une des premières entreprises à se laisser tenter. Elle avait eu des ententes globales visant les appels interurbains avec divers groupes de services, comme les chantiers de cette dernière n'avaient qu'à verser les modestes frais d'adhésion au groupe.

« Les avantages que nous étions en mesure de leur offrir surpassaient ceux de tous les autres groupes d'achats », explique Barry Gibson.

Les Premières nations signataires ont d'abord eu droit à un prêt préférentiel pour la composition de numéros, elles ont bénéficié de rabais de près de

40 % sur les prix au catalogue de Grand & Toy en plus de jouer d'autres prix vilains issus d'ententes globales conclues avec la compagnie de location d'autos Budget, Xerox, General Western Star Trucks, les services médicaux First et une myriade d'autres entreprises.

Les efforts déployés par les quatre équipes initiales ont permis au First Nations Buying Group d'ouvrir son marché en Ontario, où un accord a été conclu entre des collectivités autochtones et Bell Canada. Phil Fontaine, l'ancien chef de l'Assemblée des Premières Nations, a certainement eu son mot à dire dans la signature de cette entente, puisqu'il continue d'être consulté pour de nouvelles affaires.

M. Birch présume que la coopérative va maintenir de nouvelles villes le Québec et la Colombie-Britannique. « Pour moi, les frontières sont là pour être franchies, conclut-il. Ne pourrions-nous pas nous tous les mêmes objectifs, peu importe notre lieu de résidence? »

Des Bloods à la tête d'une entreprise de 67 millions de dollars

Il y a maintenant 15 pays différents pour assister à l'arrosage de champs agricoles au sud de l'Alberta, tout près de la frontière du Montana.

En effet, ces champs produisant des céréales spéciales et de haute qualité qui ferment le tour du monde.

À la suite de ces échanges internationaux maintenus se trouve le projet agricole des Bloods. Ce projet s'est déroulé sur plusieurs décennies et a vu passer de nombreux acteurs politiques avant d'être considéré comme un modèle autochtone de clivage et d'innovation dans l'utilisation des terres de réserve.

« Nous avons planifié et mis en place le plus important projet d'irrigation au Canada », déclare Clayton Blood, directeur général du projet et l'un des 60 000 membres de la collectivité qui se partagent l'entreprise de 10 000 hectares, d'une valeur de 67 millions de dollars. Le tournant de cette histoire de réussite a eu lieu en 1947, lorsque les autorités responsables des secteurs d'irrigation ont demandé à la collectivité de céder une partie de ses terres. L'administration voulait développer davantage le réservoir St. Mary's, au sud de Lethbridge, au profit des agriculteurs de la région. Les membres de la réserve ont accepté. En échange, l'administration allait leur aider à ériger une vaste étendue de terres à irriguer.

« Les dirigeants de la collectivité se sont montrés très perspicaces », affirme M. Blood. Ils ont su saisir l'importance de montrer aux autres un système d'irrigation dans la réserve et ont compris que la question de l'accès aux terres de la réserve était délicate sur le plan politique.

D'autres rebondissements devaient s'en suivre, avec la transfert, du gouvernement fédéral aux provinces, des responsabilités en matière de terres. Plusieurs renoncements des ententes originales avec les Bloods et une série d'études environnementales interminables. Finalement, en 1989, les gouvernements fédéral, provincial et de la Première nation se sont mis d'accord pour procéder à un développement en six étapes, refusant de louer plus de millions de dollars comme une mise de fonds.

Avec environ 80 % de la surface en service, les avantages à long terme du projet pour cette collectivité sont évidents. La location de terres fermes aux cultures agricoles permettrait de faire passer 76 % l'hectare par saison, et les terres agricoles valent 370 \$ l'hectare, surtout avec les systèmes automatisés de pointe utilisés par les Bloods.

Il ne s'agit pas seulement d'une affaire de main-d'œuvre, mais aussi d'agriculture, explique M. Blood au sujet des activités qu'il supervise. On y forme des travailleurs locaux qualifiés.

Les succès à long terme de la collectivité de la Banque de Nouvelle-Écosse a exigé un engagement de dix ans de la part des fermiers avant d'octroyer aux Bloods le droit de louer les terres. Les Bloods ont immédiatement fourni les garanties voulues. Jusqu'à là, l'obligation des locataires se limitait à deux saisons.

Les grands-parents de M. Blood étaient agriculteurs, même qu'il pratiquait la médecine aujourd'hui en travaillant à Calgary, au centre de la Colombie-Britannique. Ils ont exploité une entreprise commerciale avec le groupe TransFarms de Calgary, qui a assuré la conservation d'une usure de 2 millions de dollars dans la transformation de la filière des pois.

La filière, une superbe formation à haute teneur en fibres, est estimée par les agriculteurs à valeur ajoutée de 100 millions de dollars. Les Bloods ont exploité les terres irriguées de la réserve des Bloods, traitée et pressée à l'usine de la collectivité, expédiée par camion à Calgary, au centre de la Colombie-Britannique. Les Bloods ont pu charger de bord de navires porte-conteneurs. 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« Il faut s'engager à fond, déclare M. Tiller. On s'expose à l'échec, mais on gagne aussi. C'est la seule façon de réussir. On ne peut pas faire à moitié. On doit être sûr de son entreprise. Vient ensuite, et tous les jours, une gestion solide ».

ADK Holdings génére des revenus de 38 millions de dollars

Les profits émanent des
ressources naturelles

Shane Parrish blague à peine lorsqu'il dit à ses collègues qu'il jouit à pleines dents d'une immense offre dans son bureau sur laquelle on pourra lire : « La terre, encore la terre, toujours la terre. Compris ? »

A titre de directeur général d'ADK Holdings, à Fort Liard dans les Territoires du Nord-Ouest, M. Parrish supervise les activités quotidiennes d'un groupe de sociétés autochtones relevant du domaine des ressources naturelles, dont les revenus ont atteint 38 millions de dollars en 2000. Pris de dix millions de dollars ont été versés en dividendes, notamment aux employés de la Première nation des Dénés d'Ako Koe, qui ont touché une part importante de cette véritable manne.

« La relation que nous entretenons avec la terre nous apporte du travail. Tout est tributaire de la terre », explique M. Parrish, qui travaillait auparavant au Service de développement économique du gouvernement des Territoires du Nord-Ouest.

La relation d'affaires de la collectivité autochtone avec les ressources pétrolières et gazières de son territoire a été renforcée de façon précoce en 1976, par la création de Beaver Enterprises Ltd. Beaver a d'abord entrepris de gros travaux d'entretien pour les sociétés d'exploitation de gisements, puis a ajouté au fil des ans un service de camionnage et des services d'hébergement et de restauration sur place.

Beaver, qui demeure la plus grosse société d'ADK Holdings, prouve qu'il est possible, même pour une Première nation à la fois pauvre et éloignée, de tirer profit des services concrets à l'exploitation du pétrole et du gaz. Toute une génération de jeunes employés d'ADK Holdings a reçu une formation et a trouvé du travail dans la construction de routes, l'opération de machines lourdes, le camionnage et le transport automobile, l'exploitation de stations-service, et la maintenance de chantiers pompes à béton jusqu'à 1 000 personnes.

« Nous avons des employés très compétents », assure Shane Parrish. Aussi, c'est peu de dire facile si nous manquons de main-d'œuvre locale parce que nous consommons beaucoup d'énergie à négocier des contrats.

Le dynamisme commercial de la collectivité autochtone saute aux yeux. Des partenariats pour des activités de forage, des services d'hébergement, des projets d'arpentage font actuellement l'objet de transactions avec Westcoast Energy et Enbridge Energy Transmission, en vue de l'acquisition de parts dans des pipelines. De récentes fusions et acquisitions effectuées dernièrement avec Chevron et Enbridge ont compliqué la situation, mais les ententes, mais ADK Holdings a pu s'en sortir et ne s'en laisse pas imposer.

Outre les parts dans les pipelines, les partenariats donnent lieu à une participation aux activités d'extraction minière, de transport du gaz, qui pourraient représenter plus de 30 millions de dollars de revenus de la collectivité.

ADK Holdings fait preuve d'une ambition bien nordique et vaide à prendre le rôle principal qui lui revient sur la scène commerciale.

« Au cours d'un colloque qui a lieu le mois dernier, nous avons fait valoir que, grâce aux relations que nous entretenons avec les Premières nations, nous avons développé un savoir-faire dans le domaine des partenariats, dit M. Parrish. Il sera donc possible de proposer d'autres partenariats, d'autres des possibilités de partenariats à d'autres collectivités. »

Des négociations sur les activités de forage d'ADK Holdings avec la Première nation des Dénés d'Ako Koe, le CHO Drilling Ltd., un des co-entrepreneurs, sont déjà en cours. Les forges permettront d'extraire du gaz des terres appartenant à ADK Holdings et à la Première nation des Kaskas du Yukon. « Nous désirons 25 % des parts du puits n° 38 d'AKITA, tout comme les Kaskas, pour accéder à leur territoire », dit M. Parrish.

ADK Holdings et les Kaskas ont signé un accord de partenariat commercial qui se concrétisera, Harry Deenon, chef pendant de nombreuses années, avait ardemment insisté. En ce qui a trait à l'exploitation des ressources dans le Nord, celui-ci avait l'habitude de dire : « Il ne faut pas compter uniquement sur les ressources naturelles, elles viennent prendre ce qui leur convient, puis elles disparaissent. » ADK Holdings connaît du succès parce qu'elle a réussi à rompre le cycle de l'exploitation des ressources des collectivités à long terme.

C'est un bel exemple à suivre, mais Shane Parrish prouve qu'il est possible d'être riche sans avoir les richesses de la terre. Il ne faut pas croire que les puits du caséite se mettent en place d'eux-mêmes. « Le chef Deenon connaissait les affaires et les collectivités autochtones », explique-t-il. « Il avait une vision, les possibilités qu'il offrait le domaine pétrolier, surtout à l'époque où les sociétés des collectivités à l'époque du pétrole, nous avons dû apprendre à vivre avec le monde qu'on nous a offert, et il nous a permis de nous adapter à ce monde. »

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La terre d'affaires crée les fruits de sa ténacité

Suite de la page 12

Mme Hill dirige maintenant le premier centre de santé de la réserve urbaine d'Oshweken. Le centre, Choosing to Live Healthy, qui emploie deux employés à plein temps et un étudiant stagiaire, comprend un gymnase, un bain gratuit, une piscine et un salon de coiffure. L'établissement offre en outre des services de massage, d'aromathérapie et d'acupuncture.

Sur un terrain dont elle dit ne rien que l'achat l'a entée pour la 12e fois, Mme Hill, elle a fait construire un bâtiment selon ses propres plans. Durant la construction, elle a eu deux ans, les ouvriers se tournaient souvent vers le père de Mme Hill, qui était médecin, pour lui demander où ils devaient placer telle ou telle pièce de la charpente.

« Ce n'est pas moi qui l'ai fait demander », leur répondait-elle, mais montrant sa fille et disant : « C'est elle qui a fait les plans, c'est son immeuble. »

Si Mme Hill officie son caractère énergique et rend hommage à sa famille pour l'avoir encouragé à faire carrière, elle tient cependant à dissiper la notion romantique du succès prodigé de l'inspiration.

« Je ne fais pas autre chose qu'avancer », confie la jeune femme, à qui ses clients lui demandent toutes les semaines de reprendre un emploi régulier : « Je réponds qu'il faut du temps. J'aime mon métier, mais il exige un travail énorme. Je ne veux pas me consacrer aux gens que c'est une partie de plaisir. Vous devez consacrer toutes vos journées à votre entreprise jusqu'à ce que les choses se mettent à marcher. »

Il est clair que Mme Hill a fourni tout le travail nécessaire, mais, comme bien des entrepreneurs autodidactes de tout genre, elle ne peut pas tout faire. Elle a dû déléguer à des personnes compétentes. « D'abord, Mme Hill s'intéresse profondément à ce qu'elle appelle les « thérapies parallèles », mais elle manque d'expérience pratique dans le domaine. Elle a commencé par acquiescer une formation professionnelle dans le cadre du programme d'emploi et de formation de Grand River, qui relève de Développement des ressources humaines Canada. C'est ainsi qu'elle a acquis ses connaissances en aromathérapie, dans les



Corry Hill dirige maintenant Choosing to Live Healthy, le premier centre de santé du village d'Oshweken, dans une réserve des Six-Nations en Ontario.

« thérapies parallèles », mais elle manque d'expérience pratique dans le domaine. Elle a commencé par acquiescer une formation professionnelle dans le cadre du programme d'emploi et de formation de Grand River, qui relève de Développement des ressources humaines Canada. C'est ainsi qu'elle a acquis ses connaissances en aromathérapie, dans les

traitements à la cire, les services d'esthétique et les herbes médicinales. Une telle liste d'activités peut sembler bizarrement hétéroclite dans une grande ville, mais dans la petite localité de Bonfleur, où habite Mme Hill, il n'y a pas de quoi elle devrait se sentir compétente dans un certain nombre de services concrets pour être en mesure d'attirer une clientèle variée.

« J'aime les gens, confie-t-elle, et j'ai toujours aimé travailler avec eux. » Il lui faut néanmoins un solide plan d'affaires. Elle pourra en établir un grâce à l'aide du programme des Six Nations New Credit Community Futures. Ce programme bénéficie de l'appui de l'Association nationale des sociétés

autochtones de financement, qui favorise le développement d'entreprises autochtones avec l'aide de dizaines de sociétés de financement autochtones, tout le pays et des sociétés d'aide au développement des collectivités, comme celle à laquelle Mme Hill s'est adressée. « Entreprise autochtone Canada, une initiative d'Industrie Canada, m'a aidée à concrétiser mon plan d'affaires », ajoute Mme Hill.

Impressionnée par son dynamisme et le sérieux de sa démarche, la succursale locale de la Banque Royale lui consent un modeste prêt de démarrage. En 1996, Mme Hill ouvre ses premiers locaux dans un espace loué dans un centre commercial.

Il y a deux ans, des bas prix, une clientèle variée et beaucoup d'huile de coude l'ont amenée au point où elle pouvait envisager de devenir propriétaire. Mais un nouveau plan d'affaires solide ne l'empêche pas de continuer, « des hauts et des bas fréquents », elle observe finalement un prêt du centre de développement communautaire de Two Rivers, organisme membre de l'ANAF, mais à prix fort, car on considère qu'il s'agit d'un investissement à haut risque.

« Ils offrent un excellent service, constate Mme Hill, mais leur taux d'intérêt est très élevé — plus de 12 %. Je mets beaucoup de temps à développer l'entreprise, parce que j'ai d'énormes frais de payer et que je suis en dette depuis des années. »

Cependant, Mme Hill continue de maintenir son rythme d'investissement en services, et ses employés font de même. En se lançant en affaires, elle choisissait une vie conforme au nom de son entreprise, choisissant de vivre à l'écart, « chose de vivre dans son territoire », dit-elle.

« La collectivité aussi a son rôle à jouer. Il y a des jours où j'éprouve du stress, avoue-t-elle, mais cela finit par rapporter à la longue. »

Le Canada a l'œuvre pour renforcer le savoir-faire des entreprises autochtones

Le développement socio-économique
demeure l'objectif prioritaire

L'autosuffisance, la confiance en la collectivité et un objectif bien précis unissent les peuples des Premières nations et les Inuits au Canada depuis des générations.

Les jeunes caractéristiques à relever des défis et à saisir des occasions qui s'offrent à eux à l'aube du troisième millénaire.

Pour Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada, le défi est de donner une formation aux collectivités autochtones pour qu'elles puissent croître et devenir prospères.

Robert Nault, député de la circonscription de Kenora-Rainy River dans l'Ouest ontarien, dirige Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada. Il a la responsabilité de fournir, au nom des Premières nations et des Inuits au Canada, le cadre et les outils nécessaires afin de relever tous ces défis.

« À mon avis, pour être prêt à relever ces défis, nous devons continuer de développer le secteur économique des Premières nations et des Inuits, déclare le ministre Nault. Nous devons nous assurer que les jeunes Autochtones aient un brillant avenir qui les attend, un avenir qui les encouragera à répondre d'eux-mêmes à leurs besoins et à leur offrir davantage d'occasions d'affaires. »

« Nous ne pouvons nous permettre de laisser entrer le passé. Nous devons mettre en place un climat économique qui permettra aux jeunes de cheminer sur la voie du succès, et nous devons nous y mettre nous-mêmes. »

Le ministre porte une attention particulière à quelques statistiques concernant avant tout les jeunes des premières nations et des jeunes Inuits.

Dans les collectivités autochtones, 50 % de la population a moins de 25 ans, une proportion en faveur d'un projet par voie de scrutin, pourquoi nait-il à l'écoute de sa décision? Pourquoi nait-il et j'ai tenu que les Premières nations ont une liste, la Première nation d'Osoyoos, qui vit dans la vallée de l'Okanagan, en Colombie-Britannique, ajoute un autre élément intéressant : une détermination à tout épreuve.

« Les Autochtones devraient pouvoir être eux-mêmes le fruit de leur destinée », assure le chef Clarence Louie, un dirigeant dévoué à qui l'on doit une réputation de réussite rétrospective. « Si une collectivité ne peut pas se développer, elle ne peut pas prospérer. »

« Si une collectivité ne peut pas se développer, elle ne peut pas prospérer. » Satisfait des réalisations accomplies par M. Louie, le Conseil pour l'avancement des jeunes de développement économique en Colombie-Britannique.

Les idées du chef Louie, notamment celle de mettre les terres de la réserve en garantie, trouvent rapidement un écho chez les collectivités autochtones. Maintenant que la Première nation d'Osoyoos exploite des terres supérieures à la contribution qu'elle apporte au gouvernement fédéral. Formée d'environ 700 membres, la Première nation d'Osoyoos exploite des terres supérieures à la contribution qu'elle apporte au gouvernement fédéral. Formée d'environ 700 membres, la Première nation d'Osoyoos exploite des terres supérieures à la contribution qu'elle apporte au gouvernement fédéral. Formée d'environ 700 membres, la Première nation d'Osoyoos exploite des terres supérieures à la contribution qu'elle apporte au gouvernement fédéral.

obtenir des capitaux de risque, avant même que les entreprises autochtones ne prospèrent, le ministre admet qu'il doit faire davantage pour encourager le développement économique.

« Les entreprises autochtones veulent de véritables partenariats dans les projets de grande envergure », explique le ministre Nault. Les collectivités indiennes et des Premières nations jouent d'ailleurs un rôle de premier plan dans plusieurs grands projets d'exploitation des ressources naturelles qui commencent à prendre forme.

« Alors, pourquoi ne bénéficieraient-elles pas des avantages que détiennent les autres collectivités (financières)? Non seulement seraient-elles gagnantes sur le plan financier, mais elles attireraient de nouveaux investissements dans leur plus grande stabilité. »

« Tous les paliers de gouvernement doivent travailler avec les peuples autochtones et le secteur privé afin que ce potentiel devienne une réalité. Nous devons dialoguer et cerner les partenariats et les initiatives qui permettront aux Autochtones de participer davantage aux grandes initiatives régionales de développement économique et d'en tirer profit. »

Par ailleurs, M. Nault croit que les collectivités des Premières nations peuvent véritablement répondre d'eux-mêmes à leurs besoins économiques, certes en profitant de programmes et de politiques de soutien gouvernementaux aux entreprises autochtones, mais surtout en étant bien en main les rênes de leur destinée.

L'autonomie et l'exercice des pouvoirs sont la pierre angulaire pour bâtir des collectivités stables et autosuffisantes qui peuvent participer pleinement à la croissance économique du Canada. Des recherches ont montré que lorsque les Premières nations établissent des institutions qui s'harmonisent à leur culture, elles réussissent à développer une économie forte et durable.

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avait été conçu dans le but de solidifier les gouvernements autochtones de même que les citoyens canadiens », soutient le ministre Nault.

Le ministre estime que l'accès aux capitaux est le principal obstacle à l'édification d'une économie autochtone.

« Surmonter cet obstacle est essentiel pour créer des emplois et briser le cycle de dépendance qui existe encore dans trop de collectivités autochtones, affirme-t-il. »

« En travaillant avec les gouvernements fédéral, provinciaux et territoriaux, le gouvernement du Canada est déterminé à relever ce défi. »

« Depuis l'année 2000-2001, j'ai réorienté les priorités de mon ministère pour affecter 75 millions de dollars de plus au développement économique stratégique, somme qui sera de 100 millions de dollars l'an prochain. Ces fonds s'ajouteront aux budgets des initiatives qui soutiennent le développement économique et la création d'emplois des Premières nations, ajoute le ministre. »

« Nous avons annoncé une initiative de 5 millions de dollars qui donnera des garanties aux entreprises et aux entrepreneurs autochtones. Le Fonds de garantie contractuelle pour Autochtones s'appuie sur le savoir-faire des institutions financières autochtones qui connaissent le mieux les besoins et les attentes des affaires autochtones. Ce fonds est le premier en son genre au Canada. »

« Comme tout, le ministre Nault a déclaré, le ministre Louie a déclaré : « La route sera longue, mais la destination en vaut la peine. Nous savons que nous recevrons des nouvelles formidables si nous partageons équitablement les possibilités et les outils de la réussite avec le plus de gens possible, déclare le ministre Louie avec enthousiasme. En travaillant en partenariat avec les peuples autochtones, les provinces, les territoires et les collectivités, nous pouvons bâtir un meilleur avenir pour tous les Canadiens et Canadiennes. »

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En action

Entrepreneurs inuits et des Premières nations

THE GLOBE AND MAIL — LE JOURNAL NATIONAL — GLOBEANDMAIL.COM — LE VENDREDI 16 MARS 2001

Un entrepreneur offre son expertise à l'étranger

Un homme d'affaires est d'avis que le milieu canadien des affaires doit engager le dialogue avec les Premières nations

David Tuccaro est fort bien équipé en matériel lourd de construction et il s'en sert pour bouleverser les mentalités.

« Il importe de plus en plus que le milieu canadien des affaires entretienne des rapports avec les Autochtones », de dire l'homme d'affaires dynamique de Fort McMurray, originaire de la collectivité inuite de Mikiwew. « Autrefois, les Autochtones étaient considérés comme des obstacles onéreux. Or les choses ont évolué, et l'on nous considère maintenant comme des partenaires précieux. »

M. Tuccaro a pris la tête du groupe des partenaires précieux. En effet, ses entreprises Neegan Development Corporation et Tuc's Contracting se sont associées à Syncrede Canada, un acteur de premier plan dans l'exploitation des sables pétroliers de l'Alberta, un projet qui représente plusieurs milliards de dollars.

« Qu'il s'agisse d'énergie, de foresterie ou d'exploitation minière, fait observer l'homme d'affaires de 42 ans, à mesure que les promoteurs avancent vers le nord, ils rencontrent des populations autochtones de plus en plus nombreuses. Tôt ou tard, qu'ils le veuillent ou non, ils devront ouvrir le dialogue avec les gens les plus touchés par leurs activités. »

« Si nous ne profitons pas de la situation pour négocier avec les gens qui exploitent les ressources près de chez nous, nous en ressentirons les effets pervers. »

Étant donné la bonne foi qui l'anime et le respect considérable dont il jouit parmi les siens, M. Tuccaro attire des auditeurs attentifs lorsqu'il prend la parole — sans rancœur, mais avec fermeté — sur de tels sujets. En 1991, après une année passée à la présidence de Neegan, M. Tuccaro achève l'entreprise d'excavation et d'exploitation minière à quatre Premières nations de la région. Il transforme cette entreprise en difficulté en chiffre d'affaires de 2 millions de dollars en une société vigoureuse dont le chiffre d'affaires s'élève à 10 millions de dollars l'an dernier.

Le personnel de Neegan se compose à



Gareth Jenkins, directeur général de Neegan, et David Tuccaro debout à côté d'un camion de terrassement de l'entreprise

70 % d'Autochtones. Pour sa part, l'entreprise Tuc's Contracting, qui fournit l'eau et les camions-videurs utilisés dans le nettoyage des déchets industriels et des eaux usées des chantiers, dispose d'effectifs à 60 % autochtones et d'un chiffre d'affaires qui atteint 4 millions de dollars en sept ans.

« Une entreprise ne peut plus simplement entrer, exploiter les ressources et repartir en laissant un trou béant dans la terre, affirme M. Tuccaro. Les ressources sont là pour tous, mais tous n'obtiennent pas leur part dans le passé. Ne nous donnez pas la charité, donnez-nous du travail. »

« Non seulement l'association de Neegan avec Syncrede a-t-elle créé de l'emploi,

mais elle a permis à Neegan d'accroître ses connaissances dans des domaines tels que le relèvement des normes de sécurité. M. Tuccaro veut gérer son entreprise selon des normes internationales et cela lui vait de nouveaux projets en Nouvelle-Zélande, où les collectivités autochtones maories ont fait appel à lui pour l'aménagement d'espaces commerciaux. »

« Dans bien des cas, la réalité des groupes autochtones de par le monde c'est qu'ils disposent des terres, mais ne possèdent pas les compétences de gestion nécessaires pour conclure une entente, explique l'homme d'affaires. Certains projets sont tellement importants qu'il faut compter de 5 à 10

années pour en assurer le bon fonctionnement. »

« Par le passé, de grosses multinationales venaient acheter des terres et tout ce que les propriétaires autochtones retiraient de la transaction c'était des emplois subalternes. »

C'est pourquoi M. Tuccaro propose d'aider à mettre au point une approche de gestion à long terme pour ses clients maories, qui ont, selon lui, des objectifs semblables à ceux des Premières nations de l'Alberta.

« La majorité des Autochtones que j'ai rencontrés aimeraient pouvoir participer à l'économie nationale et mondiale », indique-t-il.

M. Tuccaro fait preuve d'une détermi-

nation prodigieuse qui lui a valu une attention nationale; il possède des sociétés de consultation en environnement, de fabrication de meubles et d'autres entreprises.

Outre le courage individuel nécessaire, les jeunes, croit-il, ont besoin qu'on leur ouvre l'accès aux outils de la réussite. Et la clé c'est, d'abord et avant tout, l'éducation.

« Les dirigeants des collectivités des Premières nations doivent se vouter paternellement à la cause de l'éducation, conclut-il. L'économie connaît des changements d'orientation, des hauts et des bas, des essors et des crises, mais si nos jeunes sont instruits, ils pourront toujours se débrouiller. »

« J'avais trimé dur pour les autres, le moment était venu de travailler pour moi. »

Corey Hill a quitté son emploi éreintant de soudeuse pour ouvrir un salon d'esthétique et un centre de santé.

On s'est rendu compte que Corey Hill était une jeune femme déterminée lorsqu'elle s'est présentée à un cours de soudure à l'âge de 17 ans. Elle était la seule Autochtone et la seule femme de sa classe à fréquenter

le collège technique de Guelph, en Ontario. On ne savait rien de ce qu'elle était venue faire là, jusqu'au jour où elle avait acquis la formation voulue pour décrocher un emploi à la Six Nations Natural Gas Company.

« J'avais travaillé pour les autres, le moment était venu de travailler pour moi. »

Après plusieurs années passées à pratiquer le métier de soudeuse, Mme Hill surprend de nouveau toute la collectivité mohawk de Grand River, en Ontario, en quittant son travail à la compagnie de gaz, raconte la femme d'affaires de 29 ans. Je me suis dit qu'après avoir travaillé pour les autres, le moment était venu de travailler pour moi. »

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Corey Hill exploite un centre de santé prospère à Oshweken, en Ontario.

L'Anokiiwin Training Institute ouvre ses portes

Les territoires autochtones du Canada regroupent de gigantesques richesses telles que des densités de pétrole et de gaz et les mines d'or et de diamants. Or pour assurer le développement économique durable, rien ne vaut le développement des compétences et la création d'emplois.

Elaine Cowan a bâti toute sa carrière sur ce principe inouï. L'Anokiiwin Training Institute, son école rise à Winnipeg, a formé plus de 1 000 élèves, dont un bon nombre ont été recrutés pour le travail par l'entreprise d'une agence de recrutement, l'Anokiiwin Employment Solutions.

« Nous sommes passés par là », indique Mme Cowan, femme d'affaires ojibway qui, en 1999, a été honorée du titre de femme entrepreneure de l'année par la Women's Business Owners of Manitoba. « Nous avons été élevés dans la collectivité autochtone, et nous avons

eu nous-mêmes à surmonter plusieurs obstacles. »

Comme le montrent les statistiques et les faits de la vie courante, les obstacles sont considérables et ne font que s'accroître. Le taux de chômage est beaucoup plus élevé dans les collectivités autochtones que dans le reste de la société canadienne, et toutes proportions gardées, il y a deux fois plus d'Autochtones que de non-Autochtones qui occupent des emplois subalternes.

Autre fait significatif: la population autochtone, qui s'élève à 1,4 million, est beaucoup plus jeune que celle de l'ensemble du Canada. Au dernier recensement de 1991, 621 500 Autochtones étaient en âge de travailler. Il y en aura 300 000 de plus en 2006.

« On fait de gros efforts pour embaucher des candidats autochtones qualifiés, mais le problème maintenant

est qu'on se les arrache », fait observer Mme Cowan. « Je pense que toute cette question exige une approche très créative. Il y a une foule d'Autochtones en chômage et très peu de recruteurs qui s'intéressent à ce réservoir de main-d'œuvre. »

L'éducation et la formation sont évidemment essentielles à la résolution du problème du chômage. Sur ce plan, les collectivités autochtones ont un écart considérable à combler, puisque seulement la moitié de leur population a terminé des études secondaires, comparativement aux trois quarts de la population canadienne.

L'innovation dont parle Mme Cowan doit s'exercer, selon elle, dans le développement des compétences et le placement. C'est cette idée qui l'a amenée à s'associer à un partenaire en 1995 pour fonder ce qui est devenu

l'Anokiiwin Group, entreprise qui compte maintenant des bureaux et 40 employés à Thompson et à Winnipeg.

Jusqu'à-là, j'avais surtout travaillé dans le secteur public comme directrice de la formation auprès des collectivités autochtones du Manitoba », raconte la femme d'affaires, qui avait été à l'emploi du ministère des Affaires du Nord du Manitoba et de la Régie de l'énergie du Manitoba. « Mes nombreuses années d'expérience dans le domaine m'ont permis d'adapter des formules créatives à l'égard du développement des ressources humaines. Je me rendais souvent à une de mes collègues s'il n'était pas préférable de déléguer l'approche générale en faveur d'une approche très personnalisée axée sur les besoins individuels. »

Les méthodes de formation de l'Anokiiwin adaptent les techniques d'apprentissage des adultes en général aux

modes d'apprentissage propres aux cultures des différents groupes autochtones représentés par les participants. Des sages autochtones prennent part aux activités des programmes, et les évaluations se font au sein d'un « cercle de partage » qui renforce l'orientation communautaire du processus d'apprentissage.

Les cours de formation en gestion et en informatique sont parmi les plus populaires, mais l'Anokiiwin offre aussi de la formation professionnelle dans le fonctionnement de machinerie lourde, dans la conduite de camions et en menuiserie. En règle, les emplois sont souvent rattachés au secteur des ressources et exigent des compétences dans les métiers de la construction, dans le tourisme et l'hôtellerie, ainsi que dans les soins de santé. Dans les centres urbains, on recherche surtout des compétences techniques et administratives.

Les sociétés de financement autochtones offrent de nouveaux débouchés

S'outiller pour réussir en affaires

Les projets d'entreprises autochtones ont longtemps semblé irréalisables aux préteurs de premier rang.

Au Yukon, en 1985, une réalité a favorisé la création de la société de financement autochtone (SFA) Dana Naye Ventures, qui prête non seulement de l'argent, mais aide ses clients à dresser leur plan d'affaires, leur offre des conseils de gestion, met de l'avant des atouts et maintient un programme d'affaires à l'intention des jeunes.

Ce n'est là qu'un exemple parmi les 38 SFA du Canada qui prêtent en moyenne jusqu'à 250 000 \$ à la fois tout en fournissant un soutien administratif.

Les besoins qu'on visait à combler sont variés. Comme la Loi sur les Indiens ne permettait pas aux préteurs de prendre les biens de réserve en garantie, les banques ne s'exposaient à aucune sécurité sur les prêts concédés aux Autochtones. Ainsi, si un entrepreneur autochtone devait fournir une garantie sur les modalités du contrat, il n'obtenait presque jamais un contrat de construction, même sur les termes des Premières nations. Après deux ans de collaboration, l'Association nationale des sociétés de financement autochtones et d'Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada ont institué le Fonds de garantie contractuelle pour Autochtones. Bientôt mis en œuvre à l'échelle nationale, ce fonds fournit une garantie de participation des marchés et aide les entreprises et les entrepreneurs autochtones à surmonter les obstacles hérités du passé.

L'article 89 de la Loi sur les Indiens stipule qu'un préteur ne peut se rendre dans une collectivité autochtone pour solliciter des renseignements sur des prêts. Scott Drummond, directeur du bureau de l'est de l'Association nationale des sociétés de financement des autochtones, à Toronto.

« Alors, dans les années 50, le gouvernement fédéral a commencé à nous aider en créant des prêts aux entreprises autochtones. Or, c'étaient des fonctionnaires fédéraux qui nous prêtaient l'argent, nous n'avions pas de prêteurs de métier. Puis, au milieu des années 80, Emploi Canada, Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada et Industrie Canada ont unifié leurs efforts pour créer les sociétés de financement autochtones. Nous allons voir donner des fonds dont nous avons besoin, dissimulés, et nous serons responsables de les prêter. »

La condition préalable à ce soutien additionnel, bien sûr, c'est que les SFA aient une meilleure compréhension de la situation des entrepreneurs autochtones et des obstacles auxquels ils font face lorsqu'ils cherchent des capitaux pour combler leurs besoins.

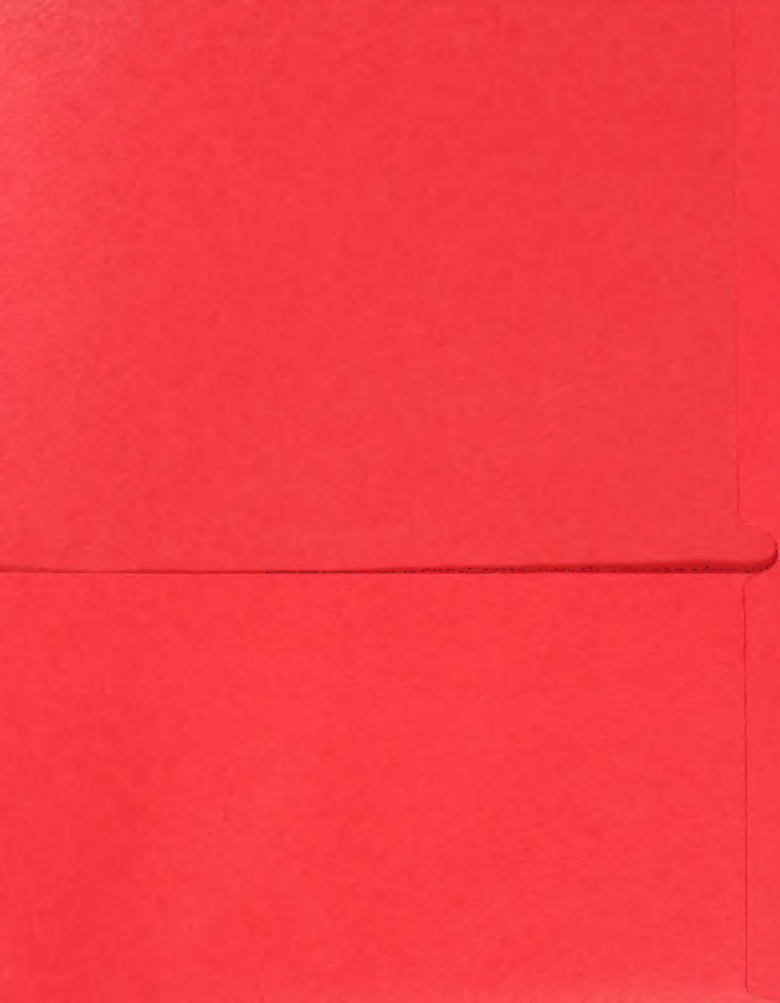
« Si nous comparons notre taux d'acceptation des demandes de prêts à celui des banques, nous constatons qu'il est beaucoup plus élevé », affirme M. Drummond. Toutefois, nous n'amoindrissons pas nos risques, qu'il s'agisse de la procédure ou du processus. Nous prêtons l'argent, mais nous le surveillons de près. Les grandes banques s'exposent à des risques énormes en prêtant à des clients, tandis que nous nous trouvons dans une situation diamétralement opposée. »

Pour compenser une perte moyenne de 5 % sur les prêts, nous attribuons une part du risque au client en exigeant un taux d'intérêt plus élevé. À l'heure actuelle, ce taux s'élève à environ 11,5 %, pourvu-il. Contrairement à nos banques, nous utilisons une formule d'octroi de prêts qui leur permet de prêter la moitié de la valeur totale des biens offerts en gage, obtenant également, fait observer M. Drummond, Nous ne prêtons pas qu'à des gens que nous connaissons. Notre approche est beaucoup plus personnelle, car nous prenons toute la collectivité en considération. »

Lorsque M. Drummond a fait ses premières armes d'entrepreneur, il y a dix ans, les banques ne voulaient pas conclure d'affaires avec les Premières nations, de ne pas perdre entièrement, fait observer M. Drummond. À la fin de la part d'Affaires indiennes et du Nord Canada. Selon lui, les temps changent, tout comme la mentalité de certains hauts dirigeants du milieu financier.

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Canada





Oxford

